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Authentic Christian holiness embraces the commitment to work for justice in our world. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis states clearly: “We cannot hold up an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon, and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty” (n101). The great Hebrew prophets placed the pursuit of justice at the center of their message. Isaiah, for instance, insisted: “Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” (1:17). Later in the book of Isaiah, we are told that what pleases God is “to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house” (58:7-8). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, continuing the prophetic tradition, teaches, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt 5:6). Francis insists that we express our intense desire for righteousness by pursuing justice for the most vulnerable, the poor and the weak, “even if we may not always see the fruit of our efforts” (n77). In pursuing justice for all, the Pope advocates following the consistent ethic of life by protecting both the innocent unborn as well as the poor, the abandoned, the destitute, the underprivileged and the victims of new forms of slavery (n101). Commitment to the cause of justice is an essential component of our vocation to holiness and our quest for greater spiritual maturity.

In his 2015 address to the U.S. Congress, Pope Francis raised up the example of Dr. Martin Luther King, who led the march from Selma to Montgomery fifty years ago. He praised King for inspiring us with his dream of “full civil and political rights,” which leads to “action, participation and commitment” and which awakens what is “deepest and truest in the life of a people.”

Dr. King does indeed serve as a prime example of the commitment to justice that is at the core of Christian practice. Martin was born January 15, 1929, and named for his father, the pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. From a young age, he was immersed in the life of the church, which proved to be a vitally important influence on his life. When he was a high school student, he travelled by bus to a debate contest in Dublin, Georgia, and on the return trip was forced to give up his seat to a white person – a humiliating experience which produced in him a deep anger. He was a good student, entering Morehouse College in Atlanta at age 15; attending Crozier Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, from 1948 to 1951; and completing his doctorate in theology at Boston University four years later with a dissertation comparing the theology of God in the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich and the Unitarian philosopher Henry Nelson Wiemen.

In May of 1954, King made the crucial decision to pursue a career as a pastor rather than as a professor of theology, taking a position as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. Within a year, he was deeply involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, occasioned by the arrest of Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat to a white person. During that long, bitter struggle against racist customs, Martin was viciously attacked, including the fire-bombing of his house. On one occasion he felt so overwhelmed that he seriously considered resigning his leadership position. Late in the night, he went to his kitchen to pray for guidance and heard an inner voice saying: “Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you even unto the end of the world.”

Strengthened by this transforming experience, King persevered, leading the boycott to a successful conclusion which thrust him into national prominence. During the rest of his brief life, his activities were well reported. In 1957, he established the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and in 1959 he visited India to learn more about Gandhi and his effective use of non-violent strategies. The year 1963 was extremely consequential. Martin wrote the challenging “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” that castigated sincere white moderates for being “more devoted to order than to justice.” He helped organize the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and delivered to some 250,000 demonstrators his “I Have a Dream” speech, which has continued to inspire efforts to work for social and economic equality in the United States. He opposed the Vietnam War in a speech at the Riverside Church in New York, which included this indictment: “A nation that continues to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.” This courageous moral stand, reinforced in later speeches, eventually cost him the support of his most powerful ally, President Lyndon Johnson.

In 1965, King led the bloody 50 mile march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, which led to the passage of the Federal Voting Rights Act that same year. In 1967, he helped plan the “Poor People’s March” on Washington to persuade Congress to pass an economic bill of rights for poor Americans. Finally, in 1968, he came to the support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, where he delivered his “I’ve Been to the Mountain Top” address and was assassinated the next day, April 4, 1968, by James Earl Ray. The death of the “drum major for justice” at age 39 generated outrage and mourning throughout the country and the world.

Martin Luther King continues to provide citizens of the United States with a compelling vision and solid reasons for participating in the quest for justice based on the American Dream and liberation themes in the Bible. In his first major public speech in December,1955, at the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he argued that if their struggle to abolish Jim Crow laws was wrong, then “the Constitution is wrong” and “Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer.” Throughout his all too brief life as a public theologian, King constructed many of his addresses around this fundamental strategy of corelating American ideals and relevant scriptural themes. In this way, he developed a distinctive North American liberation theology, designed to gain the support of white Americans in the struggle for racial and economic justice for all.

Dr. King insists that we should work for justice because we are social creatures, interdependent persons who are responsible for one another. As he put it: “We are responsible human beings, not blind automatons; persons not puppets,” who are “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” We know the temptation to evade our responsibilities, but our true calling is to be faithful to “the drive for freedom,” which moves us with “cosmic urgency” to create a more just and equitable world where all God’s people enjoy economic opportunity and a share of political power.

King reminds us that the God who freed the Israelites from the cruel fate of slavery in Egypt and gave them social, economic and political freedom calls us to participate in the crucial project of liberating both the oppressed and the oppressors from the enslavement of unjust dominating relationships. He imagines God not as a Cosmic Tyrant or an Almighty Monarch who deprives us of freedom but as the ultimately mysterious “Benign Power,” who has two outstretched arms, one “strong enough to surround us with justice” and the other “gentle enough to embrace us with grace.” We enjoy “cosmic companionship” with this God who encourages us to temper the struggle for justice with tenderness and mercy.

The inspiring sermons of the eloquent Baptist preacher encourage us to hear Christ’s command to love our neighbor as a call to overcome the oppression of social sin and to create just institutions, systems and structures that enable human beings to flourish. He encourages us to reflect on Christ as the Mediator, who makes it possible to relate to God in a personal way, and the Exemplar of Humanity, who is “what every person must strive to be.” In a sermon on the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus the poor man, King points out that the sin of Dives was not one of overt cruelty but of consistent omission; failing to notice Lazarus, lacking empathy for his situation and especially accepting the fundamental inequality as normal and proper. He often applied this Gospel teaching to our current situation, pointing out that good people who fail to protest injustice are guilty of cooperating with it by their “appalling silence.”

According to Dr. King, the Church, which is both a social institution and a religious community, has a moral responsibility “to save the soul of America” and to help establish the beloved community of justice and love. The Church is called to expose the roots of prejudice based on fear and to overcome the false consciousness that supports unjust social institutions and structures. It should have an active program that helps to heal the brokenhearted and to liberate the oppressed. The Church, which keeps alive the challenging memory of Jesus, should advocate non-violent approaches in the struggle against powerful oppressive forces, meeting “physical force with soul force.” As King makes clear, Church membership should not shield us from the messy struggle for justice but should energize and motivate us to do our part to establish the beloved community where all can flourish.

For the heroic icon of non-violence, the Christian moral command to love our neighbor includes both personal conversion and social transformation. We are called to love our enemies, to do good to those who persecute us and to go the extra mile in the pursuit of justice. Following the teaching of Jesus, we should put away the sword of violent confrontation and employ nonviolent civil disobedience to identify and transform sinful structures and patterns of discrimination. In the struggle for justice, the goal is not to defeat the oppressors but to win their understanding and cooperation in establishing a more equitable social order. King refined his Christian commitment to non-violence through dialogue with Henry David Thoreau, Reinhold Niebuhr and Mohandas Gandhi. He argues forcefully that Christ’s law of love leaves no room for apathy, escapism and passivity in the face of systematic injustice, but calls for active engagement in the great project of creating a more equitable social order. Despite shattered dreams and personal disappointments, we must persevere in the pursuit of justice, hopeful that God remains with us, as promised, and that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

As we have seen, the courageous life of Dr. Martin Luther King and his inspiring sermons and speeches provide a compelling vision of a mature Christian spirituality committed to the pursuit of justice. This vision is grounded on solid theology: we are social beings with communal responsibilities. God calls us to care for the marginalized; Christ commands us to love our enemies; the Church has the task of creating the beloved community; Christian morality includes combatting social sin; and God’s promise of the final victory of justice will prevail over all the oppressive forces.