

**PANEL PRESENTATION – THE CTSA AT 75:  
LOOKING BACK, AROUND, AND FORWARD**

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**PAPER TWO – AN IMPERATIVE TO ACT**

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My presentation in recognition of the seventy-fifth anniversary of our Catholic Theological Society of America emerges from dissatisfaction. The twin sources of my discontent are the injuries spawned by the coronavirus pandemic *and* white racist supremacy.<sup>1</sup> Thus, I meet you on this occasion with hurt, sorrow, and anger: I am dissatisfied with Catholic theology in the United States, with the Catholic Theological Society of America.

I am *not* the first plenary speaker who *loves* the CTSA, who *loves* and *values* the persons and work of Catholic theologians to profess dissatisfaction. Jesuit Walter Burghardt expressed this very sentiment in his 1968 presidential address, given at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. He said: “I am dissatisfied with Catholic theology in America, with the Catholic Theological Society of America.”<sup>2</sup> Burghardt acknowledged that American theology had made progress over the previous decade and credited that progress to listening: Catholic theologians in America, he said, “perhaps, for the first time really [were] listening to what God is saying outside the formal structures of institutional Catholicism;” were listening to the Spirit speaking through Protestantism, the Jewish community, the arts, the university, process

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<sup>1</sup> The coronavirus pandemic exposed political, economic, technological, housing, employment, medical, racial, cultural-ethnic, and ecclesial inequities within US society. More than likely similar fissures opened within Canada and Mexico. While I cannot speak of Mexico, a recent study disabuses us of any idyllic notion of Canada as a place of inclusion and equity for peoples of Indigenous and African descent; see Nan DasGupta, et al, with CivicAction, *The Pervasive Reality of Anti-Black Racism in Canada* (December 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, “Presidential Address: Towards An American Theology,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 23 (1968), <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/2656>: “I am dissatisfied with Catholic theology in America,” 20.

philosophy, the exact sciences, and the behavioral sciences.<sup>3</sup> “Why, then,” he queried, “this smoldering dissatisfaction? Because, all this is not enough—not enough by half.”<sup>4</sup>

Not far from this hotel stand two symbols of my discontent. . . . Resurrection City and the Pentagon. . . . For me Resurrection City and the Pentagon are symbols—symbols of theological impotence of a radical failure within the CTSA—failure to produce or even initiate an American theology. I mean a theology whose neuralgic problems arise from our soil and our people; a theology with a distinctive style and rhetoric; a theology where not only is the Catholic past a critique on the American present, but the American present challenges and enriches the Catholic past; where the Catholic theologian is heard because he [sic] is talking to living people, about themselves, in their own tongue.<sup>5</sup>

Fifty-three years after Walter Burghardt’s challenge, eighteen years after Jon Nilson’s presidential *cri de coeur*,<sup>6</sup> we have come a far piece—but, not far enough. *I am more than dissatisfied with Catholic theology, I am angry with Catholic theology.* Last year, at the height of the pandemic, Dr. Sherita Hill Golden of Johns Hopkins Medicine drew attention to the adverse and disproportionate number of African American, Latinx, Indigenous, and migrant women and men who contracted and died from COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> But, well prior to the onset of the pandemic, members of these communities faced common social and economic problems: crowded living conditions spawned by longstanding racial residential segregation and redlining and cruelly-named “essential work” in refuse collection, recycling, landfill operations, delivery services, food services, transportation, and home health care—work that *could not be* performed from home and required close contact with others. These communities along with poor and working-poor white children, women, and men, especially in rural areas, faced food deserts and unreliable availability of food; erratic access to health care due to lack of insurance or underinsurance; chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 22. Bringing his remarks to a close, in the third to the final paragraph Burghardt issued a stinging demand: “At this challenging, frightening moment in American history there is not a single gut issue of human existence that has summoned our theological fraternity to a systematic effort, to bring its many-splendored resources to focus in creative agony. We each do our little thing, from Adam to Zeno; we somehow find the few dollars to keep our private projects breathing; we skirmish with Roman congregations . . . and the world passes us by, the poor and the rich, the black and the white, the learned and the illiterate, because we have so little to say. We have proved what needs no proving—that God is transcendent; we have not shown that He [sic] is intimately involved in our life and our death,” Ibid., 26.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Nilson, “Presidential Address: Confessions of a White Racist Catholic Theologian,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 58 (2003): 64-82, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/4583>.

<sup>7</sup> Sherita Hill Golden, M.D., M.H.S., “Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color,” <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities>.

and lung disease, and recurring stress induced by income inequality, discrimination, domestic abuse, random violence, and systemic racism. Already vulnerable populations were rendered even more vulnerable to the lethal coronavirus.<sup>8</sup> In the United States, we need an effective, intelligent, and passionate theology of work,<sup>9</sup> a theology that advocates for a “radically sufficient economic order.” A theology of work, as Christine Firer Hinze explains, that “envisages work and economic livelihood as parts of a holistic, flourishing life that eschews both workaholism and the work-spend squirrel cage, and includes time and resources for rest, leisure, self-development, family and personal relationships, and community and civic participation.”<sup>10</sup>

The second source of my discontent is *relentless white supremacy*.<sup>11</sup> Following the lynchings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, our Board of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Consider that Federal Poverty Guidelines/Levels (FPL) set the *minimum annual income* required by a family of four (4) for housing, utilities, clothing, food, and transportation in Massachusetts at \$26,500.00. Consider that a one (1) bedroom apartment in Mattapan, Massachusetts, rents at \$1,550.00 per month or \$18,600.00 for the year; this leaves \$7,900.00 for utilities, food, clothing, and transportation. The average rent in Boston is \$3,133 for roughly 808 square feet. 93% of rents for Boston apartments are *above* \$2,000; 6% of rents for Boston apartment range from \$1,501.00–\$2,000.00. The federal minimum wage has not been raised since it was set at \$7.25 in 2009.

President Joe Biden has developed an infrastructure proposal that focuses on the *common good*—for *all*. His plan calls for substantial investment in *human infrastructure* or *human capital* by constructing or modernizing public schools, making community colleges more accessible, building high-speed broadband networks; improving public housing; upgrading veterans hospitals and clinics; improving access to quality, affordable home or community-based care for the elderly or people with disabilities; increasing pay for care workers, who are disproportionately women of color. The proposal invests in *material infrastructure* by replacing aging lead pipes and service lines; building and repairing roads, railways, and bridges with a focus on clean energy; plugging oil and gas wells, and reclaiming abandoned mines, see <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2021/04/01/2-trillion-infrastructure-bill-charts-detail-bidens-plan/4820227001/>. Biden would pay for these improvements with a tax overhaul dubbed the ‘Made in America Tax Plan’ that would incentivize job creation and investment in the US, and end profit-shifting to tax havens and ensure large corporations pay their fair share. This plan would raise the corporate tax rate to 28%—but, still below what corporations paid before the previous president’s tax cuts in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 265.

<sup>11</sup> The chief tenet of white supremacy is that white people are superior to all other ‘races’ and thus should dominate these others. ‘White supremacy’ denotes the way in which a given society is structured or arranged to allow white people, on both collective and individual levels, to enjoy advantages (privileges) over other racial-ethnic groups, despite formal legal equality.

The term *critical race theory* (CRT) denotes intellectual tools or strategies or theories that interrogate the historical and contemporary complicity of law in upholding white supremacy. CRT was initiated in the mid-1970s and vigorously advanced in the 1990s primarily by African American, Latinx, and Asian American legal scholars. In an effort to promote social justice, critical race theory problematizes and destabilizes the construction of race and racism. Some early theorists include Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Anita Allen, Taunya Banks, Derrick Bell, Harlon Dalton, Richard Delgado, Neil Gotanda, Trina Grillo, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams; see Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, et al, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Key*

Directors issued a statement expressing anger, grief, and dismay at these and other murders of unarmed people of color that have occurred over the past several years and acknowledging our church's "tragic history of complicity in the nation's endemic racism and an inability to recognize that complicity."<sup>12</sup> The board's statement called *all* of us as theologians, members of the CTSA to a "deeper engagement in our scholarship and teaching with the theological contributions coming from communities directly impacted by racialized violence, especially from Black, Womanist, Feminist, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian thinkers." Further, the board called us "to respectful listening" to advocates for racial justice, who heretofore, have had little or no role in formal theological scholarship; to mentoring minoritized students in our classrooms; and "to consider advocacy for racial justice and systemic change as a component of the service [we] render to the church and the academy."<sup>13</sup>

Without doubt, this statement was and is necessary; I wrote to thank President Aquino for her leadership. *But the statement does not go far enough.* It hurts me deeply to say that the statement repeats what has been argued, implored, and pleaded at CTSA conventions annually since the mid1970s by Joseph Nearon, Virgilio Elizondo, Jamie

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*Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1996), Crenshaw "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward," *Connecticut Law Review* 43, 5 (July 2011): 1253-1353; Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, 8 (June 1993): 1707-1791.

The term *intersectionality* was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw to call critical attention to the ways in which oppressive structures (e.g., class, gender, race, homophobia, classism, ableism, etc.) are interconnected and cannot be interrogated or understood separately one from another. See, Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); forthcoming, Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (New York: The New Press, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> CTSA Board of Directors, "Statement on Racial Injustice and State Violence" (June 3, 2020), <https://www.ctsa-online.org/resources/BoardStatements/CTSA.StatementRacialInjustice.3June2020.pdf>. Literature on the attempt of the Catholic Church in the United States to address issues of enslavement, lynching, segregation, discrimination, and ongoing racial hurt include, The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), "Discrimination and the Christian Conscience," (1958); NCCB "Brothers and Sisters to Us" (1979); the Pontifical Commission *Iustitia et Pax*, "The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society" (1988); USCCB, "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love," (2018). Members of the CTSA have raised some of these issues, see Joseph T. Leonard, S.S.J., "Current Theological Questions in Race Relations," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 19 (1964): 81-91, <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/2563>. See also, William Osborne, *The Segregated Covenant: Race Relations and American Catholics* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967). In "Integration Vs. Gradualism," William J. Kelly, S.J., wrote: "Total integration of the Negro into religion, politics, and the socio-economic order is the only exercise of justice and charity meriting the designation Christian. To delay action now, in the name of a prudent gradualism, is to sustain a shameful and sinful condition," "Integration vs. Gradualism," in *Reign of the Sacred Heart* 39, no. 4 (April 1967): 6; Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1990), Cyprian Davis and Jamie T. Phelps, eds., *Stamped with the Image of God: African Americans as God's Image in Black* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003); Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> CTSA Board of Directors, "Statement on Racial Injustice and State Violence."

T. Phelps, Orlando Espín, and Sixto Garcia.<sup>14</sup> Are *we* listening to the Spirit speaking to *us* through our minoritized members? Are *we* listening to the Spirit speaking to *us* through the anxiety of poor, working-poor, and working-class Americans of *all* racial-ethnic backgrounds? Are *we* listening to the Spirit speaking to *us* through the movements #MeToo and BlackLivesMatter?

As the world's largest professional association of Catholic scholars, have we done enough to grapple with the systemic white racism that permeates our nation, our church, our parishes, our colleges and universities and seminaries? *I think not.* We must do *something now!* You must help white Catholics in your parishes, dioceses, and classrooms understand what has gone on in our country and what is going on now and why. If white Protestant congregations can grapple intelligently and humbly with the theological work of Black Catholics, so can white Catholics—and *you must introduce them to that work*—in your parishes, dioceses, and classrooms.

Do not email or telephone or text Bryan Massingale or Vanessa White to ZOOM or speak with your parishes or students. All of us as Catholic theologians are trained researchers, skilled at reading, contextualizing, explaining, and interpreting Thomas Aquinas and Ignacio Ellacuría, Julian of Norwich and Simon Weil. *You can and must read and explain* to white Catholics in the pews of your parishes and dioceses the insights of Diana Hayes and Jamie Phelps, Cecilia Moore and Diane Batts Morrow. *You can and must read and explain* to white Catholics in the pews of your parishes and dioceses the insights of Cyprian Davis and Thea Bowman—and *yes*, the insights of James Hal Cone and Katie Geneva Cannon. *You can read and must explain* the insights of Rachel Bundang, Gemma Cruz, Miguel Diaz, Joseph Flipper, Peter Phan, and Nancy Pineda-Madrid. And, *yes*: Black and Indigenous and Asian and Mexican American and Latinx Catholics in the pews also need to learn about one another's cultures and struggles! *We must do something!* *What kind of Catholic theologians are we, if racial justice is deemed optional to Christian discipleship?*

*This is an altar call:* I ask you to pledge *here and now to take action* in the coming Fall semester to introduce and facilitate discussion in your parish, during Advent *and/or* Lent, of a theological work that addresses racism *or* that offers a Black, Indigenous, Mexican American, Latinx, or Asian perspective. I ask you to pledge *here and now to take action* in the Fall semester to include in your syllabi theological works by Black or Indigenous or Mexican American or Latinx or Asian or feminist thinkers. I ask you to pledge *here and now to take action* in the Fall semester to introduce and facilitate an *interdisciplinary* faculty discussion in your college or university or seminary of a relevant book that addresses racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, anti-Semitism, Islamaphobia, or hatred of Asians and Pacific Islanders.

*Please do not misunderstand or dismiss me.* I know that some of you already do these things, have done them for some time; Dennis Doyle at the University Dayton has worked at this for years. And a few of you have written me in the past few weeks about reading Black Catholic theology with your students. I thank you and ask you to continue and to encourage and help your colleagues to do the same.

*This is an altar call: What kind of Catholic theologians are we, if even the mildest forms of advocacy for racial justice are considered optional in following Jesus?*

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<sup>14</sup> Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Theological Society of America, A Story of Seventy-Five Years* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021), 56-57.