

A RESPONSE TO MARGARET E. GUIDER

PROLOGUE

I begin this response where Professor Guider ended, that is, with a "turn to the child" through an act of moral imagination by engaging as an adult haunting memories of childhood vulnerability. As a child, I remember raising money to ransom "pagan babies." Such an expression and the memories associated with it often elicit laughter and smiles of Catholic nostalgia, as evidenced in plays such as "Late Night Catechism" and "Nonsense." Recalling these memories now, however, I am conscious of clear, though never-before-articulated associations: "pagans" lived in Africa and Asia; "pagans" had black or brown skins; "pagans" had to be ransomed or they could not get to heaven. Thus heaven, like America, was presumed to be mostly *white*. It never occurred to my childhood mind that there were Chinese or Japanese people in heaven; certainly none of the art in my boyhood churches imaged that possibility. In other words, I was taught—without it ever being explicitly stated—that "pagans" had to become like "us" if they were to gain salvation. I had not yet realized that I myself was not fully or unambiguously included in "us"—the painful double-consciousness of being a black Catholic. These are the haunting, dangerous memories of a vulnerable child—of one taught a form of racism in subtle and preconscious ways through the agency of the Church's mission *ad gentes*. Many of us present here, if not all, are also those vulnerable children who have been wounded by similar haunting and (mal)formative memories.

I begin with this act of moral imagination to make concrete one of the challenges posed by Guider in her challenging reflection: that we theologians need to name how the painful and dangerous legacy of racism wounds us *all*, so that we can render a healing and just service to the Church.

SUMMARY

It is a joy to offer a public response to Professor Guider's provocative and eloquent presentation. Her central thesis is that the Church's *missio ad gentes*, while a constitutive element of its entrusted mandate, is compromised by the counterwitness of Christians. She persuasively argues that among the most scandalous forms of this counterwitness is racism, specifically, the Christian community's embrace of and/or complicity in the ideology of white European/American cultural superiority. The collusion of Christianity with white racial supremacy confronts the theological community with a fundamental vocational challenge, a challenge of fidelity to its call to deepen the Church's understanding

of revealed truth. Theologians are called to the "dangerous and demanding" tasks of (1) confronting their own personal complicity in and wounding by the cultural legacy of white racism; and (2) naming and exposing the institution's complicity in the sin of racism, for the sake of the success of its missionary mandate and its identity as the bearer of the Gospel.

To all of this, I can only say "AMEN!" For Professor Guider is advancing an argument that I—and my black Catholic theological colleagues—have been making for quite some time. Three features of her presentation are particularly noteworthy and significant. First, she places a critique of racism at the *center* of her moral analysis of the *missio ad gentes*, rather than regarding it as a secondary or peripheral issue. Racism is at the heart of mission's "underside," and as such demands privileged attention. Second, Guider presents racism as a systemic, structural, and ideological reality—an interlocking structure of white privilege and advantage—and not only as a matter of personal prejudice or bigotry. In other words, her key concern is not merely with racism as it affects persons of color. Her interest rather lies with white privilege and the harm it does to those whom racism appears to advantage. And third, she rightly names racism—that is, white supremacy—as a *transnational* reality which has had detrimental effects not only upon persons of color in the United States, but also upon the peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania as well. She thus exposes white supremacy as a global reality that needs to be considered in any adequate analysis of colonization, globalization, and cultural imperialism.

As a result, Guider demonstrates why racism does not concern only those who are its more obvious victims. She well articulates how the evil of racism, and the religious community's espousal or toleration of this evil, is a threat to the integrity of the community's identity. Thus racism becomes a matter of concern for *all*.

I welcome Professor Guider's contributions and value her voice. My contribution in this response will be (1) to press even further her thesis of racism's centrality; and (2) to articulate two challenges that her presentation poses to the "craft of theology" and its practitioners.

RACISM'S CHALLENGE TO MISSION

As a way of sharpening Guider's central thesis, let me raise the question: Why is racism such an obstacle to the *missio ad gentes* that it merits privileged attention? The obvious answer is because its counterwitness undermines the credibility of the Gospel which proclaims the equal human dignity of every person as *imago Dei*. Yet there is more to be said.

Recall that religion is a cultural product, a symbolic expression of a people's identity and understanding of life. Moreover, a people's social and cultural environment, their understanding of life, determines the kinds of religious

questions they raise. Our pleas to the Divine arise out of our social and cultural situation.¹ Thus Pope Paul VI wisely noted:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, *if it does not answer the questions they ask*, and if it does not have an impact upon their concrete life.²

The reason for this seems obvious: belonging to a faith which does not address a people's deepest cultural questions leads to a profound sense of alienation and estrangement. One comes to believe that the Divine is, at best, irrelevant. At worst, the Divine proclaimed becomes alien, foreign, potentially even hostile to one's identity and understanding of life.

These reflections, in the light of Guider's paper, lead to some demanding, even troubling, questions: Can what she calls "the white church of history" meet or respond to the religious needs and questions of those who are not white? For example, can a "white" church—which Guider describes as "a Church that is self-referentially white and speaks in a white voice"—address the faith questions which arise out of the African American cultural experience? I argue that a white church will not—indeed *cannot*—honor the existential concerns of "nonwhite" peoples . . . if by "white church" we mean a church identified with a stance of racial privilege, dominance and pseudouniversality (that is, racial hegemony). Recall that Guider, correctly in my judgment, sees racism as more than pejorative attitudes and actions; rather, she calls it is a "system of white supremacy and white superiority." It is essential to this "whiteness"—as a stance of normative supremacy—that it be the arbiter of what is considered "real," and thus worthy of study, consideration, and attention. Thus, to the extent that the Catholic Church is a "white" institution, it cannot adequately respond to the religious questions of those who are "other." In fact, it must deem their questions unimportant, irrelevant, insignificant, impertinent, or even dangerous—for they challenge, even threaten, its stance of undisputed dominance.³

Racism, understood as an ideological structure of white supremacy, limits the Church's ability to demonstrate the relevance of its evangelical proclamation to a non-European cultural context . . . precisely because it prohibits honoring that other's cultural questions. As Edward Braxton remarked concerning the limited success of the Church's mission to African Americans: ". . . the Catholic Church, looked upon with suspicion as a largely white, racist, middle-class reality, has not been able to raise the questions and illuminate the responses of

¹James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975) 41.

²Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #63; emphasis added.

³I develop these reflections in greater detail in "The 'Cultural Divide' and Its Pastoral Implications," a paper privately published by the Black Catholic Congress (Baltimore MD: 2000).

its tradition in a way that touches the minds and passions of black people. There is no 'existential fit.'⁴

Thus racism is a decisive impediment to the Church's *missio ad gentes*. I raise these considerations as a way of not only agreeing with, but even further pressing, Guider's central argument: Racism, understood as a cultural system of white supremacy, and the personal and institutional complicity of Christians in this reality deserve privileged attention in reflecting upon the *missio ad gentes*.

RACISM'S CHALLENGE TO (MORAL) THEOLOGY

I now turn to the task of briefly indicating some of the challenges to the discipline of theology (and moral theology in particular) present implicitly in Professor Guider's paper. I will highlight only two. The first relates to her call to create a space for ecclesial confession, repentance, and penance for the sin of racism. I wholeheartedly agree. Yet, I believe that this task is encumbered by the privatized sense of sin prevalent in the Church as evidenced both in the official church's understanding of racism's sinfulness and in its liturgical practice of reconciliation. Elsewhere, I developed at length the argument that official ecclesial statements on racism privilege its personal and interpersonal manifestations over those which are systemic and structural: "In practice, the [American] bishops understand the sin of racism as consisting of [conscious] attitudes of racial animosity and personal acts of culpable omission and/or commission."⁵ Indeed, John Mahoney, in his magisterial survey of the history of moral theology, contends that the Catholic moral tradition in general has found it difficult to handle the reality of collective or corporate responsibility.⁶ This difficulty both stems from and is supported by the official church's insistence that individual confession and absolution of sins—which accentuate personal responsibility and culpability—is the normative (and often the only pastorally approved) vehicle for sacramental reconciliation.

But this emphasis, indeed insistence, upon individual sinfulness cannot do justice to what Guider recognizes as "the root evil" and "incredible" gravity of racism. As I have written elsewhere, "[A] theology of sin that stresses the deliberate acts of individuals operating out of conscious malice cannot give an adequate account of racism's pervasive, demonic, and enduring presence."⁷ Thus the challenge to Catholic theology, and to moral theologians in particular, is to

⁴Edward Braxton, "Evangelization: Crossing the Cultural Divide," *Origins* 27 (27 October 1997): 272-79 at 276.

⁵Bryan N. Massingale, "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61 (December 2000): 700-30 at 709.

⁶John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Moral Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 34.

⁷Massingale, "Episcopal Teaching on Racism," 728.

make social structural sin the *primary* paradigm or focus for understanding human sinfulness. Such a shift would provide a theological foundation for more adequate liturgical practices for acknowledging and healing corporate sinfulness and evil.

The second challenge to the craft of theology posed by Guider's paper—one closely related to the first—concerns her observations over both the skepticism greeting recent official apologies for past racist atrocities, and the resistance such apologies generate in many parts of the church. At the heart of this skepticism and resistance is the contentious issue of whether the church, as an institution, can be imputed with social or structural sinfulness. The basic contours of this debate are no doubt familiar to many of us, and because of space constraints cannot be recounted in detail here.⁸ I simply make the following observations.

One, the various efforts of social reconstruction and reconciliation undertaken around the globe—I have in mind particularly South Africa and Guatemala—have made it clear that a full acknowledgment of the truth concerning the roots of past injustice is essential for building a just future. In the words of one authoritative commentator, "Interracial justice entails *hard acknowledgment of the historical and contemporary ways* in which racial groups harm one another, along with affirmative efforts to redress justice grievances and restructure present-day relations."⁹

The second is that in its official statements on racism, one cannot help but note the great care that the magisterium takes in admitting the culpability of individuals—even Church leaders—while exonerating, even *celebrating*, the Church itself.¹⁰ This distinction between the sinfulness of Church leaders as individuals and the blamelessness of the Church (and/or magisterium?) is increasingly seen

⁸For a very competent overview of the major points at issue in this discussion, see Bradford E. Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61 (June 2000): 207-38.

⁹Eric K. Yamamoto, *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 8.

¹⁰Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988) ##2-7. The beginning footnote to this section sets the tone of the document: "No attempt is made here to trace a complete history of racism, nor of the attitude of the Church in this regard. Rather, some highlights of this history are indicated, *emphasizing the consistency of the teaching of the Magisterium* concerning the phenomenon of racism. This by no means implies an effort to gloss over the weaknesses and even, at times, the complicity of certain Church leaders, as well as of other members of the Church, in this phenomenon" (emphasis added).

What makes this statement ambiguous, confusing, and even troubling, is the correlation drawn between the innocence of the magisterium and that of the Church itself. This footnote, and the overall tone of this section, come perilously close to conflating the sinlessness of the Church (a matter of contested tradition) and the innocence of the magisterium (which was never held by the tradition).

as forced or strained—even self-serving—especially by those who have been the victims of ecclesial racism. For example, it strains the limits of credibility to argue that the racism undergirding the practices of the Holy Childhood Association stemmed solely from the acts and omissions of sinful individuals—and not acknowledge that this agency's actions were sanctioned by numerous competent authorities and supported by a collective ecclesial ethos. At the least, such a distinction seems a far cry from the "hard acknowledgment" or "full account" essential for healing an estrangement that the magisterium admits was occasioned by those it commissioned to act in its name.

My point is simply this: the "sinfulness" of the Church demands extensive—and courageous—theological and ethical reflection in order to provide the basis for the difficult confession which is a *sine qua non* for genuine racial justice and reconciliation.

I conclude by noting how indebted we are to Professor Guider for placing the neuralgic yet critically important issue of racism at the forefront of our consciousness and at the heart of the service we theologians render to our church. It may well be true, as she contends, that we have yet to hear a fully authentic ecclesial voice speaking out against racism. It is no less true, however, that her presentation provides a hint of what that voice could one day be.

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