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Cover Page Footnote
For the development of a number of key ideas in this article I am indebted to William Hart (Fr. Bill) McNichols, Notre Dame scholar J. Matthew Ashley, and my Regis University colleague, Jason Taylor.

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At the Foot of the Black Cross in America

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Abstract

The colloquy with Christ on the cross during the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises frames a consideration of the possibilities of, and obstacles to, white metanoia and solidarity across the color line in the face of egregious racial injustice. The author highlights the role of the imagination and desire in the birthing of empathy and in the merging of Christ crucified with the suffering of peoples of color in US society, even while insisting that the beauty and richness of “Black Lives” cannot be reduced to suffering. Drawing from Thomas Merton and Pope Francis, the author underscores the importance of drawing near in encounter and the sowing of personal relationships. To become “social poets” is to risk discomfort and vulnerability with others in the public and political square so as to become “sowers of change” toward justice and mutual flourishing. The article concludes with Ignatian-inspired guidelines for initiating such processes both within and beyond our Jesuit university campuses.

On the campus of Regis University in Northwest Denver, in a meditation garden just west of the St. John Francis Regis Chapel, there stands an enormous crucifix known to the Regis community as the “Black Jesus.” Situated on a hillside against a panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains, surrounded by clusters of gambel oak and quaking aspen, the crucifix has become a pilgrimage site for many, from students and staff seeking a quiet place for prayer, to faculty bringing their class for discussion around the flagstone table at the foot of the cross. The site is about 200 yards from my office, and on this day as I write, under the shadow of the white supremacist massacre in Buffalo, New York, I can only say, with grief and suppressed rage, that the Black Jesus has only grown more intense for me in prophetic and sacramental power. This latest in a long litany of racially-dominated killings, cut from the same bitter cloth as Charleston and Christchurch, El Paso and Charlottesville, calls me back to the hard wisdom of Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino. The cross of Jesus, “before being the cross, is a cross and there have been many more before and after it.” Since August 2010, the Black Jesus has stood quietly on this hillside at Regis, asking, without words: Just how many more must be crucified before your hearts are broken open? Have you eyes to see, ears to hear? Yet again, the blood of your brothers and sisters is crying out to me from the ground (Gen. 4:10).

During the First Week of The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, following a series of meditations in which we—that is, the retreatant under the guidance of a director—are asked to gaze long and hard at our sins, Ignatius invites us to “imagine Christ our Lord suspended on the cross before you,” and to meditate on three questions: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ? He then directs us, as we gaze on Christ “in so pitiful a state as he hangs on the cross,” to engage in a conversation, or “colloquy,” with Jesus, “speaking in the way one friend speaks to another.” It is a breathtaking, almost terrifying contemplation, intimate and vulnerable, linking the honest reckoning with one’s sins during the First Week—for Ignatius, a grace that ought to fill us with “shame and confusion about myself”—with the terrible suffering of a beloved friend. What would I say to Jesus in such a moment of reckoning? What would Jesus say in response to me?

I used to dismiss the colloquy with Christ during the First Week of the Exercises as a somewhat idealized picture of the crucifixion, finding it difficult to imagine myself into the scene, much less to converse with Jesus as he hangs dying on the cross.
the cross. But I’ve reconsidered, through eyes now shaped by a relentless litany of racialized killings that have forced me—and, we may dare to hope, forced many white Americans—to reckon honestly with terrifying realities that have overshadowed the lives of African Americans for 400 years, to say nothing of Native Americans and other marginalized communities. With not a little “shame and confusion,” I’ve concluded that my prior dismissals of the colloquy were unjust. Gently, Ignatius invites me to try again. Dare to place yourself in the scene. So I imagine myself standing on a street corner at night in Aurora, Colorado, not far from the campus where I teach, to witness the last words of Elijah McClain, just before he was given a powerful dose of ketamine, and passed into unconsciousness, forever.

I can’t breathe / I have my ID right here / My name is Elijah McClain / That’s my house / I was just going home / I’m an introvert / I’m just different / That’s all / I’m so sorry / I have no gun / I don’t do that stuff / I don’t do any fighting / Why are you attacking me? / You are all phenomenal / You are beautiful / And I love you.⁴

What would you wish to say to such a person, Christ asks, in the throes of such anguish?

I’m so sorry. / I can’t help you. / I’m here. / God loves you. / Try not to be afraid. / I’ll be over soon. / Why is this happening?! / Please let it be over soon.

I pause, and shudder to imagine what such a person, in such a moment, might say to me.

When police officers and EMTs bore down on Elijah McClain, he was wearing a face mask and waving his arms around, probably singing, his friends say, as he walked home from a convenience store. “It doesn’t make sense,” said one of his massage therapy clients, calling the police response “brutal.” “He was the sweetest, purest person I have ever met. He was definitely a light in a whole lot of darkness.”⁵ Photographs of Elijah playing his violin to the animals in a local shelter during his lunch break went viral in the months following his death. “He had a child-like spirit,” another long-time client says. “Elijah McClain was not conditioned to the norms of America…He was never into, like, fitting in. He just was who he was.”⁶ Here I think we come to the heart of the matter, occasioned by an honest reckoning with Christ crucified at the boundaries between personal and social freedom, individual and corporate sin. Elijah McClain, thanks be to God, “was not conditioned to the norms of America.” Neither was Sandra Bland, who refused to accommodate herself—her body, her dignity, her agency—to a bullying police officer, lights flashing, taser drawn, bearing down on her with all the power and arrogance of the state. Three days later she was found hanging dead in her jail cell.⁷

Whether trying to absorb the shock of mass shootings motivated by race hatred or the steady drip of unarmed Black and Brown persons dying in encounters with law enforcement, to what extent have I become conditioned to the norms of America, resting comfortably in the assurances that neither I, nor my children, nor anyone I love, could ever be subjected to the same fate?⁸ If African Americans have long intuited a link between the passion of Jesus and lynching—the unjust brutalization and murder of people of color, like Jesus, at the hands of racialized, religious, or state-sanctioned violence—it is fair to conclude that many white Christians today are only beginning, if reluctantly, to grasp the resonances between this central narrative of their faith and the ongoing scourge of personal, structural, and racialized violence. In truth, the human drama of the passion narratives is not so far from the horrors of Charleston and Charlottesville, Ferguson and Minneapolis, Staten Island, El Paso, and Buffalo. Jon Sobrino is right to add a fourth question in our reckoning with sin and examination of conscience during the First Week of the Exercises: “What am I doing to take the crucified peoples down from the cross?”⁹

Like so many of Jesus’s parables and teachings—think of the Good Samaritan, or the judgment scene of Matthew 25—the First Week colloquy with Christ on the cross draws the scope of our freedom into a wider field of vision that, once seen, cannot be unseen. I can no longer behold the suffering of my neighbor without at once beholding the face of Christ, Emmanuel, the humanity of God with us. Elijah McClain has become for me an almost unbearably tender icon of Christ crucified; reaching deeper into the heart...
of scriptural imagery, he is Wisdom-Sophia, God unveiled in the rejected cornerstone. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, She says, “I love you,” and “I’m just different,” and “Why are you attacking me?” in the face of the world’s power.

Of course, many white Christians and Catholics will recoil against any such identification of Jesus, much less of God, with the suffering of Blacks and other vulnerable non-white communities in America. (See the recent controversy at Catholic University of America surrounding an icon of George Floyd’s body being held by his mother, in the style of traditional pieta imagery of Christ and Mary.) To which I can only respond, humbly, with Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Any man who is capable of being satisfied with himself as he is will always manage to find a way out of the argument.”

“The genius of the Spiritual Exercises is precisely their refusal of all such argument, the rationalizations and evasions that plague our national discourse around race. Like the Gospel itself, the Exercises appeal not foremost to the head, to humane ideals, ethical principles, or even cherished dogma. Ignatius wants to draw us wholesale into the heart, the realm of desire and love—and yes, shame and confusion—by way of the imagination and all the senses. As “the Pilgrim” himself discovered in months of tortured self-examination at Pamplona and then Manresa, the lives of Christ and the saints can break open and reform, sometimes with a shock, our diseased social imaginations. Like Ignatius, we are all flawed pilgrims, stumbling our way through partial blindness. And like him, we can pray for the grace to see more clearly through the eyes of Christ, through hearts that dare to love.

For white Christians in America, to lose oneself under the Black cross is to begin to confront one’s complicity and shared responsibility in the suffering of marginalized communities, whether by “what we have done” or “what we have failed to do.” Like Jesus’s challenge to the rich young man, it is to break free from what is safe and familiar to discover the way of shared suffering and common flourishing in a society built on equity, justice, the shared pursuit of happiness. It is to find oneself in the joy of an enlarged sense of kinship, to be known and loved by our real names—not by racial or religious, economic or political identification, but by our kinship in the capacious heart of God. It is not for me to say whether I can be welcomed and forgiven by those I have long ignored or directly harmed—think of Peter’s denials outside the gates of Jerusalem—but I can pray for such a grace, and act such that I might begin to merit it. Such mutuality and risk is what Dr. King dared us to imagine as Beloved Community. And like Jesus, who dared to proclaim that the Reign of God is within our reach, King paid a very heavy price.

“The revolutionaries, whether on the right or the left, will attack and destroy,” cautioned the Jesuit scholar William Lynch. “Persons of imagination will imagine; they will build and compose. . . They will not fall back on simple thrusts of the will but on acts of imagination.” Not incidentally, Lynch continues, “This in fact should be a great goal of the universities (and seminaries), to turn out [persons] who know what is the matter and who are intent on acts of imagination which will try to do something about it.” Like Lynch half a century ago, Pope Francis draws powerfully from Ignatian sensibilities when he describes as “social poets” those persons and movements who act as “sowers of change, promoters of a process
involving millions of actions, great and small, creatively intertwined like words in a poem.” In an address last year to the World Meeting of Popular Movements, Francis used this same kind of evocative language—“our poetic capacity, the capacity to dream together”—to speak quite movingly, and approvingly, of the protests following the murder of George Floyd.

It has to be emphasized that “Black Lives” are not monolithic and cannot be reduced to experiences of racial animus, social victimization, and suffering. With the language of “our poetic capacity, our capacity to dream together,” Pope Francis gestures, as he so often does, to the sustained joy of proximity and cross-cultural encounter, the discovery of our common vulnerability and need, and thus a vision of mutual labor, friendship, and common flourishing in and through our beautiful differences. Whether in classrooms and churches, synagogues and mosques, or on the streets, marching together in nonviolent protest for change, to become “social poets” is to make of our lives a work of art, a poem of solidarity and sacrificial love. In whom is the Spirit most urgently calling us to learn what it means to imagine, build, and create another possible world? How best to use our personal and corporate gifts “to help souls” in the work of Beloved Community? What are the political demands, and necessary sacrifices, of authentic cross-racial solidarity?

In sum, Ignatius would not have us spiritualize, sanitize, or whitewash our encounter with Christ crucified in the victims of Buffalo, El Paso, and Charleston; nor would he downplay the link to our personal sin, our agency, our freedom. But neither would he wish to leave us paralyzed in shame and guilt. If the First Week’s meditations seek the grace of repentance for the damage our sins have done to the world, they end with “an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion” in the realization that we are still held and loved fiercely by God into existence. We are saved not in spite of our brokenness but because of it. The Second Week of the Exercises builds from this experience of divine mercy in the realization, as we walk alongside Jesus through his public ministry, that we don’t have to go it alone, nor are we expected to be perfect, to have all the answers. Yet we also grow in the realization that to walk in the way of love is to bear with Christ the pain of the cross: the Third Week.

As Thomas Merton insisted some sixty years ago, for white Christians called to “revolutionary solidarity” with peoples of color, the choices we face are “not interior and secret, but public, political and social.” The choice “is between ‘safety,’ based on negation of the new and the reaffirmation of the familiar, or the creative risk of love and grace in new and untried solutions, which justice nevertheless demands.” Because the disease of white supremacy is both personal and structural, so must be the conversion that leads to its cure. “How, then,” asks Merton, “do we treat this person, this other Christ, who happens to be black?”

Jan Van Ek / Ray Fedde Crucifix
Regis University, Denver, Colorado
It is not finally surprising, then, if deeply paradoxical, that a sculpture of the crucified Black Jesus, hidden among trees on a Jesuit university campus, has become for many a cherished site of prayer and contemplation. “When art comes to terms with both the wounds of the world and the promise of resurrection,” writes New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, “and learns how to express and respond to both at once, we will be on the way to a fresh vision, a fresh mission.”

For white followers of Jesus, the Black crucifix holds us before the wounds of our African American brothers and sisters, the traumatized and murdered of Buffalo, their lives (and all who loved them) cut short in a hail of bullets while buying groceries for their families—the Christ of the First Week. That it does so in a beautiful natural setting of abundant life, and in winter, the promise of new life breaking forth from barrenness, is not incidental. Here we encounter the brutality of unjust death in a landscape that quietly proclaims, as wind stirs through the aspens, “Behold, death is not the last word.” Through the veil of light dancing in shadow, Christ meets our gaze, the promise of the Fourth Week.

“Hope,” writes biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann, “must be told in image, in figure, in poem, in vision. It must be told sideways, told as one who dwells with the others in the abyss.”

Christ dwells with us in the abyss. His way of love, though rent with pain, is beautiful.

Much as in the Good Samaritan parable (Lk 10:25-37), Jesus’s advice to the rich young man (Mk 10:17-31), or any number of Gospel parables and stories of Jesus’s practice of seeking out the marginalized, this means finding creative and sometimes costly ways to cross the barriers that divide us, including the categorical ones, the labels that keep us at a distance. In the end, as Merton wrote to a young peace activist in 1966, when the sickness of society runs bone-deep, when citizens “are fed on myths” by mass media, bombarded by slogans and can no longer think straight, “it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.” How to navigate this tension between the personal and the structural with students in the classroom, on our campuses, and indeed, beyond our campus boundaries, is a matter of critical importance.

Some months ago, a faculty colleague shared the following story. “I was speaking with a new pharmacy student who was visiting Regis with his African American stepfather. During the campus tour, when he encountered the crucified Black Jesus near the chapel, he filled up with tears, and said, ‘This place must be committed to racial justice to have art like this on the campus.’” As a white faculty member and committed Catholic, I can only hope that Regis embodies the truth of those words in our collective work as a university and in the daily lives of our students. From an Ignatian view, it should be said, there is no single blueprint or uniform way for people of faith, nor for a university community, to respond rightly to the unsettling reality of racial injustice. Each of us, just as every Jesuit apostolate, will be called according to the distinct gifts we have to offer in response to the challenges, opportunities, and limitations that concretely face us and the society we serve. Still, I hope the discussion above is enough to suggest the following Ignatian insights that can guide the way of metanoia and discernment across diverse situations.

First, if you are white, don’t run from the crosses carried by communities of color. Read and listen intently to the stories of people of color. Look intently at your own privilege. Ask God for the grace of understanding, empathy and courageous imagination.

Second, don’t run from your own racial biases and limitations, fears and failures. See them, name them, and ask God—and those you may have offended—for the grace to make peace with them. In the words of Rumi, the great Sufi poet, “The dark thought, the shame, the malice, / meet them at the door laughing, / and invite them in.” Be grateful to learn from them, and then release them. Resolve that each day, through the struggle itself, you can become a new creation.

Third, resist the temptation to judge others from a privileged distance. Proximity is God’s doorway to grace. Find ways to draw near, to initiate encounters with the most vulnerable and marginalized communities. And then, repeat steps one through three. What once was novel and frightening can become a life-changing spiritual exercise, a source of fulfilment and joy, a habit of being. “Religion, the end of isolation, begins with
a consciousness that something is asked of us,”26 says Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Ignatian spirituality at its most exciting and most authentic, I believe, is a response to that prophetic and covenantal call.

Lastly, look for beauty in others and beauty will overwhelm you. Radiate kindness and it will come back to you, 70 times seven. Pray for mercy and mercy will be given you. In sum, contemplate what is and dare to imagine what is yet possible. Together, in freedom and grace, we can become a new creation, pilgrims in the way of justice, reconciliation and love. May our eyes be opened, that we may recognize Christ in our suffering neighbor, and be ready to follow.27

Endnotes

1 Jon Sobrino, Christ the Liberator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 43.


3 Ignatius of Loyola, no. 54, p. 138.


6 Stringer, “Those Who Knew Elijah.”


8 I have written elsewhere about how my wife Lauri and I, as the adoptive parents of two Haitian American children, are not able to rest in such assurances of their safety, notwithstanding the manifold privileges of whiteness that surround our family, and even, to some extent, our Black children; hence not only the grief but also the sense of helplessness and rage I mention above in the wake of Buffalo. See Christopher Pramuk, Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters Across the Color Line (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013); Christopher Pramuk, “Proximity, Disruption, and Grace: Notes for a Pedagogy of Racial Justice and Reconciliation,” in You Say You Want a Revolution! 1968–2018 in Theological Perspective, eds. Susie Paulik Babka, Elena Procaro-Foley, and Sandra Yocom (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2019), 135-57.


11 Friedrich Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 69. Compare to Jon Sobrino: “Those for whom their own death is the basic scandal and hope of their own survival their greatest problem—however reasonable this may be—will have not a specifically Christian hope or one that stems from Jesus’ resurrection but an egocentric hope” (Christ the Liberator, 44).


17 Pramuk, Hope Sings, So Beautiful, 45-51, 147-53.

19 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 17. Merton later adds, speaking of white Americans: “Most of us are congenitally unable to think black, and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves” (60).

20 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 222-24. Just as William Lynch linked “acts of imagination” to the formational goals of university education (n. 14 above), Wright’s insight about art speaks no less pointedly, I think, to the mission of Jesuit apostolates like high schools, universities, parishes and retreat centers. Or better, it speaks to the spiritual thirst that so many people bear, young and old, when they come into contact with these institutions. People yearn for environments where critical observation and truth-telling about what is can be transformed into creative and imaginative visions of what might yet be.


22 Pope Francis, “Homily for Holy Thursday Chrism Mass,” March 29, 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180329_omelia-crisma.html. Encounter, insists Pope Francis, “is the key to truth. Because truth is not only the definition of situations and things from a certain distance, by abstract and logical reasoning. It is more than that. Truth is also fidelity. It makes you name people with their real name, as the Lord names them, before categorizing them or defining ‘their situation.’” Francis continues in the same homily to condemn the “culture of the adjective,” our tendency to label and thereby dismiss or destroy our perceived social enemies.


24 Pramuk, “Proximity, Disruption and Grace”; Pramuk, *Hope Sings, So Beautiful*, 87-102; Christopher Pramuk, “The Question of God in the Struggle for Racial Justice,” *Horizons* 48:1 (June 2021): 172-94. As a theologian, my own approach to racial justice in the classroom is led by Black literature, music and art, framed more or less by the theodicy question, with help from Jewish thinkers like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Melissa Raphael.

25 Bryan Massingale, *Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice General Session #1: Fr. Bryan Massingale, Keynote*, Ignatian Solidarity Network, November 6, 2021, video, 3:01:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=327QN9sXlJ8&t=5s. The term *metanoia* in the New Testament, notes Fr. Bryan Massingale, means “more than a mere change.” It denotes a “profound about face,” an “evolution” into a new creation in Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 5:17), who dwells with us in the abyss, to recall Walter Brueggemann. Akin to the transformation of a caterpillar into butterfly, “God wants us to be more than we think we can be,” says Massingale, but such transformation will not be easy. It involves “the death of an old way of being,” and thus anticipates the resurrection, not a mere “resuscitation.”


27 Portions of this essay were developed in Christopher Pramuk, “The Gift of Tears: White Metanoia at the Foot of the Black Cross,” in *Praying for Freedom: Racism, Conversion, and Ignatian Spirituality in America* (Liturgical Press, forthcoming); used here with permission. For the development of a number of key ideas in this article I am indebted to William Hart (Fr. Bill) McNichols, Notre Dame scholar J. Matthew Ashley, and my Regis University colleague, Jason Taylor.