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I want to thank Deb-Rose and Future Church for inviting me to speak today. I am first going to discuss Archbishop Gomez's address to the Congress of Catholics and Public Life that was held in Madrid, Spain. Then, I'm going to reflect on the racism and white supremacy that still exists in the Catholic Church. I will also offer my thoughts on the way Critical Race Theory and the Black Lives Matter organization are being misrepresented and weaponized in both public discourse and the Catholic Church to influence white Catholics.

To begin his address, Archbishop Gomez stated that an elite leadership class has risen around the globe, one that has little interest in religion and no real attachments to the nations in which they live or to local traditions. Archbishop Gomez described the social justice movements as "pseudo-religions, and replacements and rivals to traditional Christian beliefs." He stated, "For years now, there has been a deliberate effort in Europe and America to erase the Christian roots of society and to suppress any remaining Christian influences." "Whatever we call these movements — "social justice," "wokeness," "identity politics," "intersectionality," "successor ideology" — they claim to offer what religion provides. They provide people with an explanation for events and conditions in the world. They offer a sense of meaning, a purpose for living, and the feeling of belonging to a community."

Archbishop Gomez describes what he calls the Christian story: "Jesus reconciles us to God and our neighbors, gives us the grace to be transformed in his image, and calls us to follow him in faith, loving God and our neighbor, working to build his Kingdom on earth, all in confident hope that we will have eternal life with him in the world to come."

But for the majority of people of color, indigenous people in the Americas, African people, African-American people, people throughout the Global South, that has not been the true Christian story, has it? The gospel message and the great commission are beautiful and guide my life. But in practice, horrible events like colonization, genocide, and chattel slavery has been the reality while men have misused the Christian faith. For African-Americans brought in chains to this country and forced to work in labor camps, what we call plantations, where they were beaten, raped, diminished, would we say the white Christian slaveholders loved God and their Black neighbor? The years of Jim Crow segregation, lynching, discrimination, is that an example of white Christians loving their Black neighbor?

In his 2011 pastoral letter on racism, the late Cardinal Francis George, then archbishop of Chicago, reflected on his lived knowledge of white Catholics' participation in the racism the Civil Rights Movement was trying to end:

Many have heard the stories of priests, nuns and lay people unwilling to welcome even Catholic African Americans into parishes and schools. There are stories of Catholic

politicians working to sustain racial segregation in neighborhoods and in the workplace and tales of fear that a school would be “ruined” because Father or Sister allowed African American Catholics to enroll their children. When the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marched in Chicago during the summer of 1966, he described the racism and hatred he encountered as more “hostile” and “hateful” than anything he had witnessed in the South. Some of the neighborhoods he entered were home to Catholic parishioners.

That’s the reality of the Christian story in the United States.

Gomez continues, “Our Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI warned that the eclipse of God leads to the eclipse of the human person. Again and again he told us: when we forget God, we no longer see the image of God in our neighbor.”

But European and American white people who claim to know God have refused for centuries to see the image of God in people who have a darker skin color than they do. The history of colonization and enslavement is precisely white people asserting their dominance over people who they claim are less than. White supremacy is the belief that white people are superior to people of color, and especially Black people. And if you need an example from today, just look at what happened at the Catholic University of America. A painting created by Kelly Latimore titled “Mama” depicts the Virgin Mary supporting the body of the dead Christ, and the artist has indicated that his painting depicts both George Floyd and Jesus. Latimore said he has received death threats and spiritual denunciations over the painting about once or twice a week. The painting was hung in the CUA campus ministry office and outside the chapel of the Columbus School of Law.

The publication The Daily Signal ran a story about the icon at the university and quoted a junior at CUA that stated, “The icon has no place at The Catholic University of America; it is blasphemous and an offense to the Catholic faith, but it is not surprising at all that it was put there. It is just another symptom of the liberalization and secularization of our campus.” Other students decried the image as well, greatly offended that Jesus was depicted as looking like George Floyd. Less than 24 hours after the image ignited international furor online among conservatives, the icon was stolen from the campus.

A Change.org Petition titled “Remove Painting of George Floyd as Jesus from CUA Campus” has been signed by over 5,000 people.

Over the weekend, I was reflecting on Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast day we celebrated on December 12th. Our Lady appeared to an indigenous man in Mexico and spoke his native tongue. She presented herself as mestizo with brown skin. However, though we consider Our Lady of Guadalupe to be the patroness of the Americas, almost all depictions of the Blessed Mother in the American Catholic Church depict her as a fair skinned European.

In my opinion, Gomez is absolutely incorrect when he says that when you believe in God, you see the image of God in your neighbor. The majority of Americans refuse to see Jesus as anything other than white or European and God as anything other than an old white man with a beard. Almost all the sacred images in stained glass windows in churches, in our prayer books, media, and Christian literature depict white-looking people. Even the North African church fathers like St. Augustine are usually depicted as white. Jesus clearly stated when you see the least of these you see me. So, why is it so blasphemous and sacrilegious to imagine seeing Jesus when you see George Floyd?

Gomez stated, “I believe that it is important for the Church to understand and engage these new movements — not on social or political terms, but as dangerous substitutes for true religion.”

Fortunately, Pope Francis disagrees with the archbishop’s view. In October’s video message on the occasion of the Fourth World Meeting of Popular Movements, Francis eloquently called those engaged in the social justice movements “social poets” and the “Collective Samaritan” who did not pass on the other side of the road when it saw the injury to human dignity caused by an abuse of power.

The last quotes I’m going to reference from Gomez’s speech are the following: “The Church has been ‘antiracist’ from the beginning. All are included in her message of salvation. Of course, in the Church we have not always lived up to our beautiful principles, or carried out the mission entrusted to us by Christ. But the world does not need a new secular religion to replace Christianity. It needs you and me to be better witnesses. Better Christians. Let us begin by forgiving, loving, sacrificing for others, putting away spiritual poisons like resentment and envy.”

Archbishop Gomez’s statement encapsulates the racism and white supremacy that is still alive in the American church and our country.

A recent analysis by Reflective Democracy examined the often not discussed white male minority rule that dominates the United States. White men hold 62 percent of all elected offices despite being just 30 percent of the population, exercising minority rule over 42 state legislatures, the House, the Senate and statewide offices in this country.

I couldn’t find a statistic for the total percentage of priests, bishops, and cardinals that are white men in the US, however, I would estimate over 65 percent because the current Ordinands that are white are percent.

In fiction, the assumption is that characters in a book are white by default. If you’re writing non-white characters like I do, you have to make sure to mention the fact that they’re not white by describing their skin color or features or hair texture. And the fact that I could not readily find information about how many white priests there are in our church leads me to believe that the default is white priests. This isn’t just by chance. We cannot just say that historically Catholics in the United States have been white. We have to ask why.

The truth is that the Catholic Church has a long history of excluding Black people from the clergy and religious orders, segregating them in churches, and treating them as second-class parishioners. Recently, more recognition has been paid to Venerable Fr. Augustus Tolton, who is the first openly black priest ordained from the United States in 1886. He was born into slavery and studied for the priesthood in Rome, where he was ordained due to racism in the United States. Fr. Tolton was rejected by every American seminary to which he applied. Daniel Rudd, who organized the initial Colored Catholic Congress said this about the matter. “For a long time the idea prevailed that the negro was not wanted beyond the altar rail, and for that reason, no doubt, hundred of young colored men who would otherwise be officiating at the altar rail today have entered other walks. Now that this mistaken idea has been dispelled by the advent of one full-blooded negro priest, the Rev. Augustus Tolton, many more have entered the seminaries in this country and Europe.”

But even going further back than Fr. Tolton’s experience, I think about Kongo Catholics who were brought to the Americas and enslaved. In various interviews with Jude 3 Project, Dr. David D. Daniels III, professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, discusses how the Kingdom of Kongo converted to Catholicism in 1491. From 1619 until 1740, the majority of Africans that were brought to the Americas were from Central Africa which included the Kingdom of Kongo. So many Africans who were captured and sold into slavery from that part of Africa were practicing Catholics. In a letter written prior to 1710 by an Anglican priest, he stated that Angolan’s (which was interchangeable with Kongoleses), enslaved on the plantation in South Carolina were asking for the Eucharist. In the letter, the Anglican priest stated he needed to make sure the Africans renounce the Pope, and convert to Protestantism.

This is heartbreaking as a Catholic, and so much history like this is not taught - it’s lost. The Catholic faith in particular has been stifled among African-American people, and the Christian faith in general was also distorted in order to keep the enslaved subservient. It was illegal for Christians who were enslaved to read the bible or congregate to worship together. And there are examples of slave bibles being used by Christian slaveholders, which had all the biblical passages about liberation and freedom from slavery taken out.

So if the church hierarchy in this country is overwhelmingly white and male, that is the lens that Gomez and the dominant culture view sacredness. In addition to the majority of priests, bishops, and cardinals being white, mainstream Catholic media, and most Catholic speakers are also white. So, no wonder, the gut-reaction of horror and disdain for Black Lives Matter that is founded by three Black women, two of whom are queer.

According to Olga Segura’s book *Birth of a Movement: Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church*, Patrisse Cullors grew up in a Christian home. Her mother was a Jehovah’s witness. However, she was forced out of her home after revealing she was queer.

Opal Tometi was also raised in a Christian home and was influenced by Liberation Theology. She has always considered faith an integral part of her life.

And other research I've done on Alicia Garza informed me that she was raised by her African-American mother and Jewish stepfather. She grew up as Alicia Schwartz and identifies as Jewish. She also identifies as queer and was married to a trans male.

So, when a church dominated and run by white males views Black Lives Matter and the three women founders who are unapologetically Black, feminist, womanist, and devoted to defending the lives of all Black people, including those who are lesbian, gay, and trans, their reaction is to not only to see them as a threat but also to denounce them as profane and dangerous.

But I do not believe God sees them as that. Instead, I relate the founders of BLM to the biblical character Hagar. In the seminal womanist book, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Delores S. Williams explores the story of Hagar through the lived experiences of African-American women from the earliest days in this country through when it was written in 1992. Williams discusses how "the African-American community has taken Hagar's story unto itself. Hagar has 'spoken' to generations after generations of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people."

Hagar's story is found in Genesis, Chapters 16 and 21. Hagar is an enslaved Egyptian in the house of Abraham and Sarah. After Sarah is unable to conceive, she gives Hagar to Abraham in order for an heir to be born to their family so Abraham's lineage is continued.

After Hagar conceives Abraham's child, the biblical text explains that she looks with contempt upon the barren Sarah. In retaliation, Sarah treated Hagar so harshly that Hagar ran away. An angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness and called her by her name, asking where she was going. He told her she was pregnant with a son, whom she shall name Ish'mael because the Lord has given heed to her affliction. The angel also makes Hagar a promise: that her son's descendants would be so greatly multiplied that they could not be numbered. Hagar called the Lord, *El Roi*, the God who sees. Hagar obeyed the angel, who told her to return to Sarah and submit to her mistress. As Williams describes, the fact that Hagar returned to the household of her slave-owner after her self-initiated liberation demonstrates her faith and her radical obedience to God. Later after returning to slavery, Hagar gives birth to Ish'mael.

After Sarah conceived her own son in her advanced age and gave birth to Isaac, she no longer wanted Hagar or Abraham's eldest son and heir, Ish'mael, in the household. Though Abraham was not pleased with his wife's wishes, he listened to God and provided Hagar with bread and water before forcing her and Ish'mael to leave for good.

Wandering in the wilderness with nowhere to go, Hagar ran out of water and gave up, believing she and her son would perish in the desert. However, when Ish'mael cried out, God heard him. The angel of the Lord spoke to Hagar again and told her not to fear. Then God opened her eyes, and she found a spring of water, from which she and Ish'mael drank to save their lives. Ish'mael grew up in the wilderness and lived long enough to marry an Egyptian woman and have children of his own.

I spend time on the story of Hagar because similar to the founders of BLM, she was a person of African descent who was not counted among God's "chosen people," but God still saw her, heard her, saved her, and promised her a future. It didn't matter that she was an outsider, God still had a plan for her and her son.

We see Hagar mentioned again in the bible in the New Testament, Galatians 4, when Paul discusses Hagar and Sarah and concludes, "therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman."

So, St. Paul furthers the example of Hagar as a woman that is outside the covenant. He doesn't want Christians to identify with the Egyptian slave woman.

But what fascinates me is that Muslims have adopted Hagar and trace their lineage to Ish'mael. As a matter of fact, the people on the Hajj pilgrimage reenact Hagar's search for water in the desert. The woman that Christians want us to despise is honored and revered in Islam.

Similarly, the founders of BLM, like Hagar, have rooted their existence outside of the bounds of white Christian doctrine. BLM affirms the lives of people who are queer, trans, or non-gender conforming, those who are not traditionally married, and those who are too often stigmatized in faith communities. The BLM movement centers the lived experiences of those that the Catholic Church would rather ignore. Those that if Jesus were walking the earth today, he would encounter with his radical love.

But my analogy to Hagar does not end there. St. Paul separates Christians from Hagar. However, the white Christian males that founded and governed the United States, did not see Black people who were overwhelmingly Christian as co-heirs to God's kingdom. They did not believe that the salvation and freedom bought by Christ's blood on Calvary extended to Black Americans both during and after slavery.

In Nicole Hannah Jones's New York Time's essay for the 1619 project, which I'll discuss more in depth when I talk about Critical Race Theory, Jones discusses the shameful paradox of Americans continuing chattel slavery in a nation founded on individual freedom. In order to justify their position, they promulgated the ideology that Black people were subhuman, and that slavery and subjugation were the natural station for people who had African blood in them. Jones writes that the Supreme Court enshrined this thinking in the law in its 1857 Dred Scott decision, ruling that black people, whether enslaved or free, came from a "slave" race.

Democracy was for citizens, and the "Negro race," the court ruled, was "a separate class of persons," which the founders had "not regarded as a portion of the people or citizens of the Government" and had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect." This belief, that black people were not merely enslaved but were a slave race, became the root of the endemic racism that we still cannot purge from this nation to this day. If black people could not ever be citizens, if they were a caste apart from all other

humans, then they did not require the rights bestowed by the Constitution, and the “we” in the “We the People” was not a lie.

I believe that this same thinking, which is really a lie from the pit of hell, is what causes bishops like Robert Barron and Archbishop Gomez, and Catholic theologians to condemn Black Lives Matter founders and the organization as pseudo-religions and dangerous. They refuse to see the truth of the racial justice movement: that it is rooted in the biblical truth that all people - including Black people - are made in the image and likeness of God, that we have inherent dignity that cannot be taken away, and we deserve a right to life.

Catholic critics especially say BLM wants to destroy traditional marriage and the family. But for me, the issue isn't my personal feelings or beliefs about homosexuality, gender identity, or traditional marriage. The issue is do I believe that every single person has inherent dignity as a child of God and deserves to live a life full of opportunity that is free from discrimination and violence.

Black Lives Matter differs from the Civil Rights movement in its embrace of non-heterosexual and non-cis gender people. Audre Lorde had made the following observation about the 1960s political climate: “The existence of Black lesbian and gay people were not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black America.”

So BLM and many people in the social and racial justice movements are rejecting the version of Christianity that excludes people whose lives and choices do not fit the dominant white Christian narrative.

But history shows that Black people have fought the white Christian narrative since we've been brought here. Black people have rebelled against the narrative that Black people are inferior to white people and are unworthy of freedom. Earlier I mentioned how the Kingdom of Kongo converted to Catholicism. David D. Daniels III, Ph.D. discussed that after the Kingdom converted, schools were set up, priests and eventually bishops were ordained, and the new Catholics learned how to read and teach the catechism. There were schools and libraries and by 1590 the capital established an Episcopal See and built a cathedral. Africans in this part of Africa along with the Kingdom of Benin and Kingdom of Wari, which are in modern day Nigeria, were Christian for centuries before they were forcefully brought to the Americas. So they learned and taught each other the Catholic faith, and when they were enslaved in the Americas, they had a different understanding of Christianity than what the white slaveholders believed. As we saw with the Stono Rebellion in 1739 in South Carolina, the African Catholics were ready to fight and rebel for their freedom.

This is true with other people who were enslaved like Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser and Toussaint Louverture (who was a leader in the Haitian fight for freedom that was the only successful slave revolt in the Americas). These men who went on to lead slave rebellions were strengthened and motivated by their encounter with God to fight for their liberation. The story of God leading the Israelites out of slavery, and the freedom promised by Christ, led them to try and throw off their shackles. People like Harriet Tubman, Frederick

Douglas, Ida B Wells, and of course Civil Rights activists like Martin Luther King, Jr believed their faith led them to seek liberation for Black people.

Martin Luther King Jr wrote the following words in the February 8, 1958 issue of the Baptist magazine Missions.

Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something in the center of our faith which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph of Easter... Yes, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. There is something in the universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, truth crushed to earth will rise again.

The truth of the sacredness, beauty, importance of Black people has been crushed over and over again in this country. Yet, these truths continue to rise again, and we saw that in 2020. The racial reckoning that happened was the largest social movement in the history of the United States. People from all different backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, came together to proclaim the truth: that Black lives matter.

But we're now seeing what MLK called a "white backlash" against BLM, Critical Race Theory, being "woke," and anti-racism efforts.

To understand the debate around Critical Race Theory and wokeness, we have to go back before the 2020 protests to August 2019. The 1619 Project was an initiative from The New York Times Magazine that began at that time and marked the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. On the website, it states the aim was to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of the American national narrative.

Along with Nicole Hannah Jones' essay, there were 10 other works of nonfiction. I want to read an excerpt from Jones' essay:

The United States is a nation founded on both an ideal and a lie. Our Declaration of Independence, approved on July 4, 1776, proclaims that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But the white men who drafted those words did not believe them to be true for the hundreds of thousands of black people in their midst. "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding

ideals. And not only for ourselves — black rights struggles paved the way for every other rights struggle, including women’s and gay rights, immigrant and disability rights.

The 1619 Project shook the very foundation of our country. It’s now a book that I would highly recommend reading. But there was no way that something as powerful as the 1619 Project was going to be published and widely read without a white backlash, which was swift. Add to that people in 2020 were widely reading books like *White Fragility* by Robin Diangelo and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi and keeping them atop bestsellers list, and watching documentaries like 13th by Ava Duvernay which exposed the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration. So people in America were learning the truth about US history, and they were ready to do something about it. The white backlash we’re seeing today was a response to this learning and unlearning of US history during the racial reckoning.

Now, I’m not exactly sure when Critical Race Theory entered the conversation. CRT is an academic phenomenon built in legal scholarship. Legal scholars examined how even if race isn’t specifically mentioned in law, the effect of racism determined by experiences, testimonies, and even anecdotes.

In a March 8, 2021 Black Catholic Messenger podcast, Nate Tinner-Williams and I had Dede Miller, who is one of the co-founders of Catholics United For Black Lives (CUBLORG), join us to discuss Bishop Barron’s critique of wokeism and his claims that racial justice movements have their roots in postmodern French philosophers and that since Christians have not stepped up to the plate in the racial justice fight, BLM has filled in.

We discussed how there are many religious people, including Black Catholics and non-Black Catholics in the racial justice movement, and even within BLM. Dede and other Black Catholics created CUBLORG exactly for the purpose of having a racial justice organization rooted in Catholic teaching.

Barron and other critics of the racial justice movement claim that wokeism and CRT see racism in everything and want to throw out everything that is American history and replace it with a history of oppression. Many white Americans want to cling to the idea of what America is and what it claims to be instead of stepping into the shoes of Black people and people of color and understanding our reality.

People are now asserting the false claim that anti-racist books and education are harmful to white children. Legislatures are inciting bans of books and lessons that teach the truth of American history.

Nicole Hannah Jones told the *Los Angeles Times*, “This idea that racial reckoning has gone too far and now white people are the ones suffering is the most predictable thing in the world if you understand American history.”

Heather McGhee calls what’s happening the “zero-sum myth.” It’s the idea that progress for people of color comes at the expense of white people. This leads white people to claim that

telling the truth about American history will leave white children to feel guilt. It's actually a white supremacist ideology that anti-racism means anti-whiteness. White supremacists are the ones who teach that when people say they are against racism, they really mean they are against white people.

Likewise, in Catholic circles today, critics claim that being against racism really means you are against Christian values and more specifically against the Catholic Church. If history has proven anything, it's proven that Black people just want our freedom in this country. Freedom from discrimination, freedom from racist policing, freedom from mass criminalization, and freedom to tell our history.

In spite of the backlash, people are recognizing there is a problem. Racism is not just a political issue but also a religious and spiritual issue. Dede Miller said that as the one true church founded by Jesus Christ, we should be the most just church. We should lead the justice movements. The Catholic Church needs to stand up and do something to break the demonic stronghold of racism in the country. It starts with each of us but should expand to every corner of the church. I'm going to conclude with a quote from Pope Francis taken from the interview of Pope Francis, "A Big Heart Open to God: An interview with Pope Francis" published in America Magazine in the September 30, 2013 issue:

The ministers of the Gospel must be people who can warm the hearts of the people, who walk through the dark night with them, who know how to dialogue and to descend themselves into their people's night, into the darkness, but without getting lost. The people of God want pastors, not clergy acting like bureaucrats or government officials. The bishops, particularly, must be able to support the movements of God among their people with patience, so that no one is left behind. But they must also be able to accompany the flock that has a flair for finding new paths.