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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH & SLAVERY

An overview

THESE SLIDES SERVE AS A BASIC BACKGROUND
ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S COMPLICITY IN
THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE ,
SEGREGATION, AND OTHER FORMS OF
VIOLENCE AGAINST AFRICAN AMERICANS

We hope this resource will be of use to you as you begin your own racial
justice ministry in your parish or community.

*Every white person in this country — I do not care what
he says or what she says — knows one thing. ... They
know that they would not like to be black here. If they
know that, they know everything they need to know.
And whatever else they may say is a lie.*

— James Baldwin, 1979

*The only reason for racism's persistence is that
white people continue to benefit from it.*

Fr. Bryan Massingale

Slavery in the ancient world

- Slavery was a widespread practice in the ancient world – war booty was seen as fair
- Hebrew Scriptures
 - *Abraham and Sarah use Hagar as their enslaved sexual property – they have other slaves*
 - *The law of Moses has legislation regulating slave holding – There is a difference between insiders and outsiders*
 - *There is a separate set of laws in the Torah for Hebrews who become slaves as opposed to those who are captured in war*
- Aristotle – said that some people are naturally slaves
- Under Roman Law
 - *Only foreigners could be enslaved, not free persons or citizens*
- In ancient times slavery is associated with foreignness
- The slavery of the New Testament, the slavery of Aristotle, the slavery of the Roman Empire is **chattel slavery**. Chattel means people are treated as objects that can be bought and sold.

Slavery Catholic Style

- The **Catholic church** from early on is going to adopt **Roman law** as the way by which it understands its own slave holding.
- Medieval era in Europe -**theologians defend slavery**
 - *Saint Augustine - slavery is a way by which God punishes sinners*
 - *Pope Gregory the Great is a slave holder*
 - *St. Thomas Aquinas (using Aristotle's logic) defends slavery noting it is accepted in canon law*
- Church ecumenical councils endorse slavery with exceptions
 - *Slavery is a **punishment***
 - ***You cannot kidnap free people and make them slaves***
 - *But when it comes to capturing foreigners, slavery is accepted*
- **NOTE:** Some argue that the Catholic Church has always been against slavery because of the prohibition to enslave free people. **That is a false argument.**
- **CONCLUSION:** In the medieval era, at the beginning of the **Age of Discovery** (*begins 15th century, Europeans conquer and colonize lands they “discover”*) **slavery, slave holding is a Catholic endorsed practice - endorsed by theologians and Canon law.**

The Transatlantic Slave Trade

It all began with the Catholic Church

- **Late in the era of the Crusades (1050-1300 CE)** Christians expand their crusades beyond the holy land. They also wanted the Iberian Peninsula where Muslims governed
 - *Spain and Portugal were in competition as they found new lands to conquer, but Portugal led on this effort.*
- **1440s CE** - Prince Henry of Portugal expands his crusading efforts to North Africa to push out Muslims
 - *He also wants to make money. He makes alliances with African leaders on the continent and initiates slave raids. There is no religious justification since it is not a crusade. This would have been considered wrong by most Catholics, but making money wins out.*
- **1452 & 1455**, Pope Nicholas V issues papal bulls (*Dum Diversas*, *Romanus Pontifex*) allowing these slave raids to take place.
 - Grants Alfonso V of Portugal the right to reduce any “Saracens (Muslims) and pagans and any other unbelievers” to perpetual slavery. This facilitated the Portuguese slave trade from West Africa. In *Romanus Pontifex* he grants Alfonso the right to extend Europe dominion over discovered lands during the Age of Discovery. Along with sanctifying the seizure of non-Christian lands, it encouraged the enslavement of native, non-Christian peoples in Africa and the New World.
 - *The people they kidnap with the help of African leaders are taken to Portugal - enslaved and sold*
- **1493** - Pope Alexander VI issues “*Inter Caetera*”
 - Authorizes Spain and Portugal to colonize the Americas and its Native peoples as subjects. The decree asserts the rights of Spain and Portugal to colonize, convert, and enslave. It also justifies the enslavement of Africans.
- **1501** – First enslaved Africans sent to New World
 - *Other countries get involved but Portugal and Brazil lead*
- **By 1866** – 12.5 million Africans captured, abused, and forcibly transported
 - *1.8 million die enroute to the Americas*
 - *Children of mothers who are enslaved also considered enslaved under Canon law*

The Transatlantic Slave Trade seeds slavery

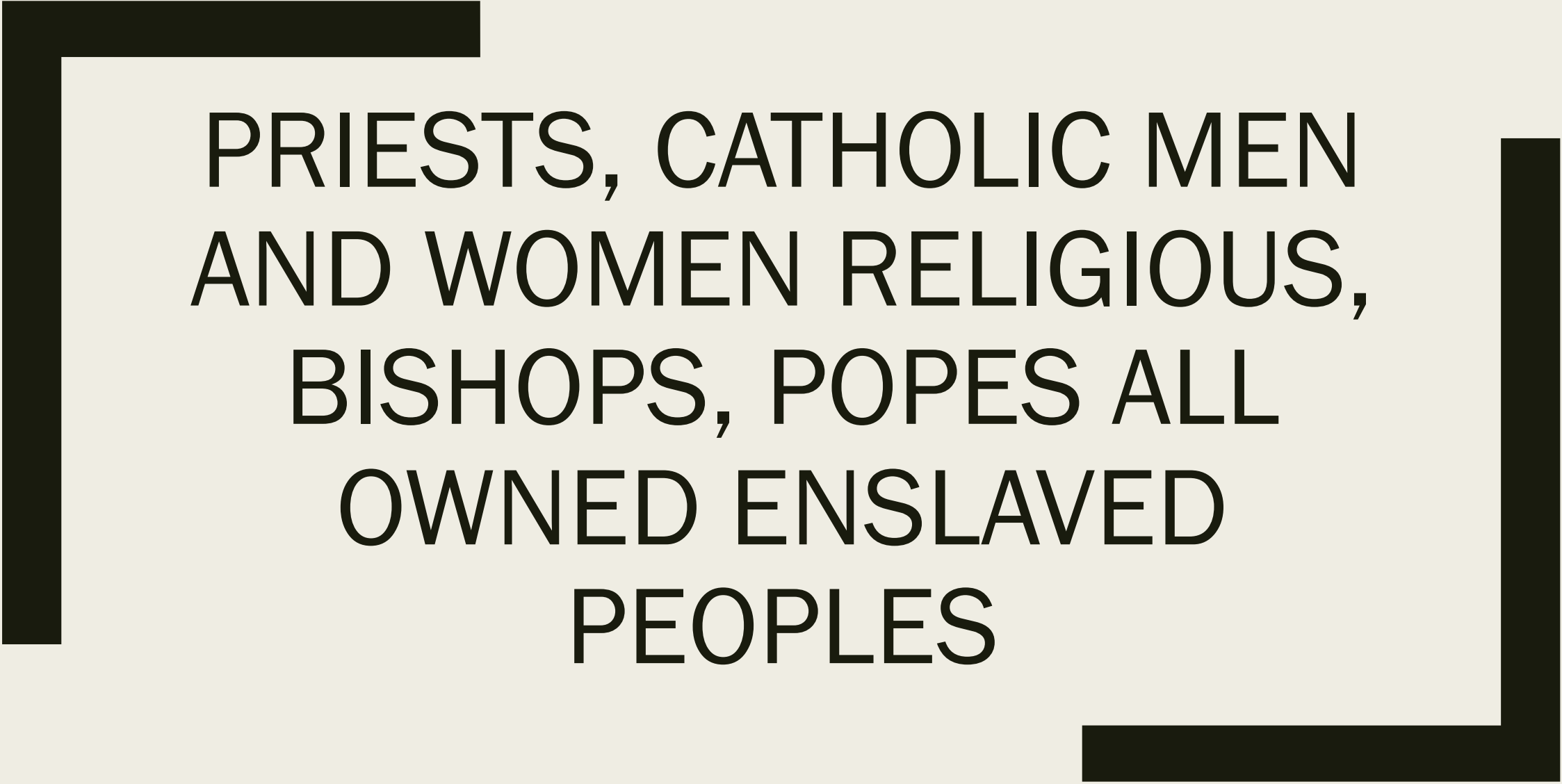
- Because children of mothers who are enslaved also considered enslaved under Canon law (and civil law), the number of people enslaved grows exponentially.
- In the U.S. territory – 400,000 enslaved people were purchased, but because slavery is passed down through the mother, it is estimated there were around 10 million enslaved people throughout the course of our history of enslaving human beings.

The Jesuits are one of the largest slaveholders. Slaveholding – c 1760

■ Brazil	5686
■ Peru	5224
■ Paraguay	3164
■ France	1816 +
■ Quito	1364
■ Chile	1121
■ Goa	810
■ Maranhão	736
■ Mexico (Cuba only)	406
■ New Grenada	358
■ England (Maryland farms)	192
■ Total Enslaved People	At least 20,877

In November 1838, Jesuits at Georgetown engineered the sale of 272 enslaved people (grandparents, families, children) to save the school from financial calamity. It is estimated that as many as 1,650 people were enslaved over more than a century and a half at Georgetown College and the six Jesuit plantations in Maryland that financed the school's operations. An estimated 12,500 descendants who are believed to be alive today. Georgetown, as one form of reparations, offers preferred admission status to descendants.

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PRIESTS, CATHOLIC MEN
AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS,
BISHOPS, POPES ALL
OWNED ENSLAVED
PEOPLES

Why did the Church do it?

Some argue

No one thought slavery was wrong then. That is NOT TRUE. There were abolitionists throughout history in the Jewish world, Christian world, and civil society.

- Aristotle, who defends slavery, writes that there are people who oppose slavery.
- Philo, 2nd century Jewish philosopher writes about two communities who oppose slavery and refuse to enslave
 - *The Essenes (2nd Century BCE – 1st Century CE)*
 - *The Therapeutae (1st Century CE)*
- St. Gregory of Nyssa (379) opposes slavery in all its forms
- Abbott Smaragdus of St. Mihiel (760 – 840) opposes slavery in all its forms
- Scottish priest John Duns Scotus (1266 – 1308) contemporary of Aquinas was an outspoken critic of slavery in all its forms.



Some argue...

Slavery wasn't so bad. It had upsides (ex: the state of Florida BOE). But that idea isn't based in historical facts.

From the beginning, enslaved Catholic people found ways to resist, upend, and escape slavery

- 1460 – Lisbon & Portugal ban public gatherings of enslaved Catholics for fear they are using holy day celebrations to plot revolts
- 1502 – The first slave revolt is crushed in Haiti, but the struggle for freedom continues. The Haitian Slave Rebellion is the first and only successful slave uprising and introduced the first African-led nation in the new world
- 1518 – Confraternities of African Catholics petition the King of Portugal to allow enslaved peoples to sue for their freedom

By 16th century, many churchmen thought slavery was acceptable, but the African slave trade was unjust.

- 1542 – Dominican Bartolome de las Casas –
 - *He was not opposed to slavery in general but opposed certain systems of slavery. Early on, he argued that enslaving indigenous was wrong but saw nothing wrong with the African slave trade. But after researching the African slave trade, he argued that it was wrong as well.*
 - *Other churchmen followed this line of thinking – that, in general, slavery is not wrong, but certain instances of it are wrong.*

One of the biggest slaveholders, the Jesuits, defend slavery & slave trade

- Jesuit Spanish theologian Luis de Molina (1535– 1600)
 - *Writes the first full-length treatise on the slave trade*
– **THIS DOC IS VERY INFLUENCIAL**
 - His logic is that some Africans are being enslaved unjustly, but some are being enslaved justly (the ones being captured by the Portuguese)
 - In his weak attempt to justify enslavement morally, he argues it is ok to buy an enslaved person, but the buyer should investigate whether they were justly or unjustly captured. In this investigation he says no one should ask the enslaved person themselves because “they are not reliable.”
- Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval (1576-1652)
 - *Ministers to enslaved people and writes a very influential book where he defends the slave trade*
 - *For the first time, a theologian uses race as a theological category shoring it up with arguments such as the “Curse of Ham” and Aristotle’s “natural slave”*
 - He reasons **blackness is a curse from God**
 - He theologizes that with God, there are different standards for black skinned people and lighter skinned people

Jesuit Peter Claver - The “model” slave holder?

- Peter Claver, SJ (1580 - 1684)
 - *Follows Sandoval – earnestly promotes his book*
 - *Never criticizes slave trade*
 - *Purchases enslaved Africans*
 - *Violent, threatening to the people he enslaved*
 - *Encouraged those who escaped to return to their masters*
 - *Like Sandoval, he ministers to enslaved peoples, owns enslaved people, and was considered virtuous...thus, he is promoted as a patron saint of racial justice*
- The theology and the model actors create the way for Jesuits to buy and sell enslaved peoples throughout the world.

Black Catholics and Allies Fight for Freedom

- 1680s – Black Catholic Confraternity members go to Rome to urge Pope Innocent XI to condemn slave trade
- Two Capuchin priests are excommunicated by Savannah bishop for preaching against the slave trade
 - *Francisco Jose de Jaca*
 - *Epifanio de Moirans* (canon lawyer)

In 1686, Moirans writes a treatise against Molina and against the Jesuits. They take it to Rome urging Innocent XI to condemn slavery in all its forms.
- But there is no papal condemnation



Others at work to combat slavery and segregation (this is only a sampling)

- 1730s – St. Augustine Catholic Church and Ft. Mose (the first free black town in US territory) becomes a haven for people escaping slavery
- Black Catholic women
 - Ann Marie Becraft - established one of Washington's earliest educational institutions open to Black children in 1820
 - Mother Mary Lange – founded first Black Catholic Sisterhood (Oblates) in 1829
 - Venerable Henriette Delille – Co-founded the Sisters of the Holy Family in 1842
 - Mary Louise Smith – Montgomery Bus Boycott Plaintiff
 - Sr. Martin de Porres (Patricia) Grey – Organizes Black Catholic Sisters as freedom fighters
 - Sr. Thea Bowman – Challenged White Catholics and the US Bishops
 - Sr. Antona Ebo – Marched after Bloody Sunday in Selma (art by Chloe Becker)
 - Amanda Gorman – after attacks on Capitol at the presidential inauguration, she leads the nation with “The Hill We Climb”
- Black Catholic Organizations
 - 1889 – Daniel Rudd organizes First Black Catholic Congress
 - 1927 – Federated Colored Catholics – Thomas Wyatt Turner – opposition from Fr. John Lafarge, SJ

First Papal Condemnation – 1838 by Pope Gregory XVI

- 1838 – Pope explicitly condemns the slave trade in *Supremo Apostolatus* – he uses the same arguments as Las Casas (slave trade is evil, slavery is acceptable) – doesn't promote emancipation. As is usually the case, the Church follows others instead of leading on justice
 - 1808 - 30 years prior Britain and the United States (Jefferson) banned participation in the slave trade (not in slavery but in the slave trade)
 - 1833 – The Slavery Abolition Act is passed by the British Parliament – expanded the 1808 act and made purchase or owning of enslaved people illegal (in most parts of the British Empire). The Brits go to Pope Gregory to ask him to condemn slavery.
 - 1838 – Pope Gregory issues the encyclical, *Supremo Apostolatus* and says the church has always been against the slave trade
- According to Chris Kellerman, SJ who has seen the Vatican files, it seems that Pope Gregory really thought the Church had always been against slavery. Apparently, Gregory knows nothing of Pope Nicolas V and others.



1888 - The Catholic Church Goes Abolitionist under Pope Leo XIII

- Pope Leo XIII issues true abolitionist encyclicals condemning all aspects of slavery as incompatible with Christianity
 - 1888 - *In Plurimus*
 - 1890 - *Catholicae Ecclesiae*
 - ***However, he perpetuates the lie that all popes and the Church have been opposed to slavery...NOT TRUE***
- *Still, Popes and the Second Vatican Council after Leo continue to strengthen this theological line*
- *John Paul II, for the first time, calls slavery "intrinsically evil"*
- ***HOWEVER, to this day, there has been no formal admission or apology by the Church that it was involved in the slave trade***



Extreme Harms and Evil Committed by the Catholic Church

- The Catholic Church sanctioned the slave trade and slavery and didn't withdraw that sanction for 400 years
- In that period there were millions of deaths, stolen lives and stolen labor, sexual violence, and a legacy of a two-tier socio-economic and political system in this country.
- To this day, no pope has admitted the Catholic Church's role or made a formal apology. In fact they have covered up this evil past.

Post Abolition – the Church still fails

- Following the abolition of slavery, the Catholic Church stood as the largest Christian practitioner of segregation.
- In the United States, where the history of many Black Catholics predates that of white and ethnic white Catholics by over three centuries, the vast majority of Catholic institutions and religious orders of men and women systematically excluded African-descended people, especially U.S.-born Blacks, from admission solely on the basis of race well into the 20th century (Williams).

Catholic Social Teaching is often late to the game, and weak in its instruction

- 1958 (After 1954 Brown vs. BOE) – The U.S. Bishops issue “Discrimination and Christian Conscience” where they argue that enforced segregation could not be reconciled with the Christian view of the human person. **BUT it did not have much of an impact because:**
 - *It came four years after the decision and most other Christian denominations had already made statements and called for action*
 - *The bishops did not encourage any action*
 - *Pope Pius XII, on his death bed, had to pressure them to make a statement.*

Stronger Catholic Social Teaching

- 1968 – *Statement on National Race Crisis* Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated
 - The Kerner Report is devastating charging that U.S. is creating two societies
 - The April 1968 publication of the National Black Clergy Conference “Church is white racist institution”
 - *The Bishops acknowledges the Church’s culpability*
 - *For the first time, the bishop recognize racism as an institutional problem as well as an individual bias*
 - *They make recommendations for urgent action*
 - *They create an urban task force but only fund it with \$28,000*

Strong Catholic Social Teaching

■ 1979 – Brothers and Sisters to Us

- After abolition, voting rights, civil rights, the bishops recognize that things have not changed. They know they need to address de facto discrimination. They write:

1. *Racism persists despite statutory changes*
2. *In the covert nature of today's discriminatory practices, indifference replaces open hatred*
3. *They link racism to economic justice*
4. *They acknowledge the institutional nature of racism*
5. *They acknowledge racism within the Church*
6. *They provide the doctrinal basis for our Catholic stance – The Gospel and CST*
7. *For the first time they call racism a sin, radically evil*
8. *They call for urgent action*

The document was strong, but not taught. A study 25 years later shows that only 18% of bishops (some repeat exhorters) issued statements on race.

The U.S. Bishops, as a whole, continue to provide weak, sometimes hostile guidance when it comes to the ravages of racism and white supremacy in our country.

Thankfully, we have Black Catholic women (National Black Catholic Sisters) who speak prophetically in times of darkness.

In 2021 - Archbishop José Gómez of Los Angeles excoriated social justice movements including Black Lives Matters calling them “dangerous” and “pseudo religions.” The NBSC provided authentic Catholic leadership in a public letter.

With all due respect, Archbishop, either you do not know the history of the Church's Involvement with the slave trade, with the segregation of churches; with black people often being relegated to the back of churches and forced to receive Holy Communion after white parishioners; the rejection of black men and women who desired to enter seminaries and religious communities. Over four hundred years of slavery, trauma, pain, disenfranchisement, and brutal violence have been a part of the fabric of this nation and the American Catholic Church.

Black Lives Matter grew out of the frustration of seeing black lives struck down over and over again with no accountability. It is a racial justice movement...a gospel movement. Scripture tells us that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. Jesus tells us in Matthew 19:19 to "love your neighbor as yourselves".

When African American lives are systematically devalued in this country and in the Catholic Church we must speak out. BLM is not a pseudo-religion; nor is it a "dangerous substitute for true religion". It is a movement very much in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching. It does not nor has it ever "served as a replacement for "traditional Christian beliefs".

As we know, the ravages of racism and white supremacy are right before our eyes.

Today Black men and women are being jailed at disproportionately higher rates and murdered in our street under the guise of law enforcement.

From 2015 – 2020 - Police officers fatally shot at least 135 unarmed Black men and women nationwide. At least 75% of the officers were white (NPR)

Further, the movement “Say Her Name” reveals that police murders of Black women are underreported

- Breonna Taylor (26) – murdered while sleeping
- George Floyd (46) – murdered by police officer Derick Chauvin
- Daunte Wright (20) – driving girlfriend home - shot in back by police officer during stop
- Andre Hill (47) – shot as he emerged from his garage carrying a cell phone
- Manuel Ellis (33) – murdered by police as he walked home from a convenience store
- Rayshard Brooks (27) – fell asleep in a drive thru
- Atalaina Jefferson (20) – shot through front window while sitting on her sofa
- Aura Rosser (40) – shot when police called after altercation – she did not drop the knife she had and an officer shot her
- Tamir Rice (12) – playing in a park
- <https://www.aapf.org/sayhername>


Another form of racism that continues to unfold...The closing/merging of Black Catholic Parishes and Schools

- THE RESEARCH: FutureChurch commissioned Center for Research in the Apostolate to study 11 dioceses to see if parishes serving Black Catholics and other Catholics of Color are being closed in disproportionately higher numbers.
- FINDINGS: Bishops are disproportionately closing and merging parishes (and closing schools) in low-income, inner-city dioceses where Black Catholics and other Catholics of Color live while opening parishes where white Catholics live. There is also a tendency to merge a majority Black parish with a White parish where Black parishioners will suffer the effects of racism and white supremacy in parish life.
- ONE EXPERT ANALYSIS (Reflects others): What emerges from this study about the way that parish reorganization has been pursued, in large swaths of U.S. Catholicism, is a white middle-class church that has succeeded -- as best it can in unpredictable circumstances -- to maintain its own social and material experience of the Church at the expense of diverse perspectives, relationships, and insights that may well have been uprooted permanently and fatally by the heedlessness of these processes.

Shannen Dee Williams on Reparations



- Making formal apologies for the church's own histories of slavery and segregation
- Stopping the closings of active African American parishes
- Reinvesting in and expanding the Black Catholic educational system
- Requiring the teaching of Black and Brown Catholic history in every Catholic school and seminary
- Endowing scholarships, fellowships and professorships for Black and Brown scholars at Catholic colleges and universities
- Broadening formal church leadership to include anti-racist women and members of the laity
- Take leading roles in campaigns working to protect Black lives, eliminate racism in the health care system, end mass incarceration and bail, and secure police reform and accountability.



WHAT CAN WE DO TO
PROMOTE RACIAL &
REPARATIVE
JUSTICE?