

Beginning a Conversation by Preaching on Racial Justice

Eddie De León

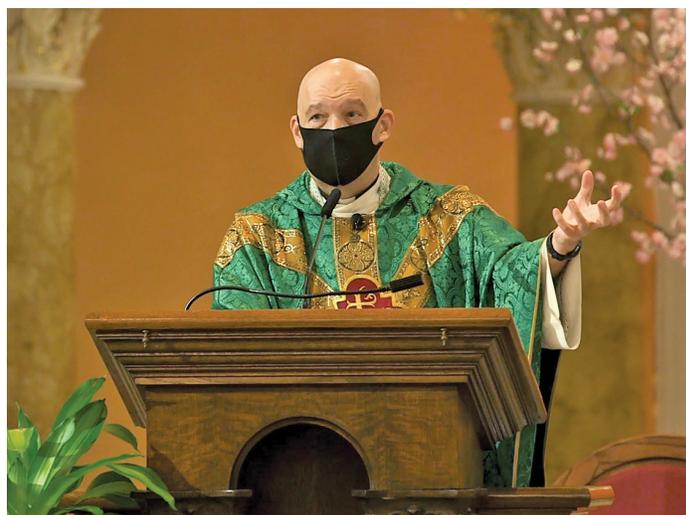
When Washington, DC, mayor Muriel E. Bowser commissioned artists to paint the words “Black Lives Matter” in fifty-foot letters on the street leading to the White House, she sought to bring about a conversation on race. The “Black Lives Matter” mural on Sixteenth Street in the nation’s capital is the type of resistance art that is meant to empower viewers, reminding them of *la lucha* (the fight), and to provoke a dialogue on racism in our country.

Eventually, other cities had the words “Black Lives Matter” painted on their streets. New York, Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Portland, and Jackson, to name but a few, joined the conversation. These artistic protests have provoked a national conversation on grave injustices. These works of art remind us that racism is still a pervasive and systemic issue and call us to eradicate this evil. What we naively thought we had dealt with in the past continues to show up in the most common and uncommon places, including our churches.

If racism is present even in our places of worship, what then is the role of the preacher? How might the homily attempt to address this ugly form of America’s original sin? How might the preacher provoke a conversation? People in the pews want to hear from their clergy. Much like the street artists, the preacher can rise and respond effectively to the same challenge. To do so, I suggest, the preacher will need to engage in prayer and study, and be open to drawing on the use of resistance art as a visual text to create a homily that addresses racism—a preaching that is prophetic.

THE PROPHETIC NATURE OF PREACHING

Night Will Be No More, the pastoral letter written by Bishop Mark J. Seitz, of the Diocese of El Paso, Texas, is an example of the prophetic nature of preaching. The letter, promulgated on October 13, 2019, the vigil of Indigenous Peoples’ Day, begins by noting the violence committed at a crowded Walmart in his diocese. “On August 3rd, 2019, El Paso was the scene of a massacre or *matanza* that left 22 dead, injured dozens, and traumatized a binational community. Hate visited our community and Latino blood was spilled in sacrifice to the false god of white supremacy” (1). Not only did the bishop name the evil of racism in his pastoral, he challenged all to another way of being and responding. He continues, “If we are honest, racism is really about advancing, shoring up, and failing to oppose a system of white privilege and advantage based on skin color” (14). He further challenges, “Charity and justice must be the work of each of our parishes, flowing from the Word of God, our baptismal commitment, and our Communion



By preaching against racism, the homilist may prompt a dialogue with the faithful on systemic inequities.

at the Eucharistic table” (64). Throughout this pastoral letter, Seitz invites us to a different way of life.

Seitz’ letter followed the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ 2018 *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love, A Pastoral Letter against Racism*. The bishops note that “[as] our nation has moved forward in a number of ways against racial discrimination, we have lost ground in others. Despite significant progress in civil laws with regard to racism, societal realities indicate a need for further catechesis to facilitate conversion of hearts. Too many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life” (9–10). And again, “The evil of racism festers. . . . Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us” (10).

These pastoral letters are examples of prophetic stances and, on a larger scale, model the role of the preacher to the community. Many preachers, however, choose not to say a word to a people who desire to make sense of the evil and racism they witness. People long to hear words of hope that are rooted in the Good News. In *Night Will Be No More*, Seitz encourages priests and deacons to help the assembly comprehend that what is experienced in the liturgy should be brought into the world. He states, “In our preaching and celebration, we should lead our people to greater awareness of the connection between

the love of God celebrated in our temples, and the love of God to practice outside their doors, including work to end prejudice and discrimination” (66).

PREPARING TO PREACH PROPHETICALLY

Naming the Social Ill

A preacher’s struggle with addressing racism might stem from a lack of words or the understanding of the nature of racism, including its systemic causes. Perhaps some remain silent because of a fear that preaching poorly on this evil would cause further harm and division. Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, points out that nothing can be changed when racism is ignored: “To avoid talking about racism can only hold our misinformation in place and prevent us from developing the necessary skills and perspectives to challenge the status quo” (87). DiAngelo sees herself with a lifelong work to address racism. She states, “Conceptualizing myself on an active continuum changes the question from whether I am or am not a racist to a much more constructive question: Am I actively seeking to interrupt racism in this context? And perhaps even more importantly, how do I know?” (87). Naming the social ill of racism and challenging the assembly is only possible through the hard work of preparation required to preach the Gospel.

Openness to the Word

In our homily preparation, we begin with prayer, continue with study, and reflect on the Word that shapes our prophetic speech. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii gaudium*, explains that the homilist must allow the Word of God to penetrate him. “Yet if he does not take time to hear God’s word with an open heart, if he does not allow it to touch his life, to challenge him, to impel him, and if he does not devote time to pray with that word, then he will indeed be a false prophet, a fraud, a shallow impostor” (151).

Identifying with the Other

Preachers may want to reexamine their methods to help the assembly to ponder racism in their lives. *Night Will Be No More* calls upon leaders to use power in new, creative, and grace-filled ways, stating, “This will require us to stand beside the poor as they find their voice and to take a supportive role in their work for justice” (62). We will need to have conversations in our parish settings regarding the sin of racism. Listening to each other is a first step. This can be followed with discussion groups to unpack the material in books such as *How To Be an Anti Racist*, Ibram X. Kendi; *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*, Michael Eric Dyson; *Barrio America: How Latino Immigrants Saved the American City*, A.K. Sandoval-Strausz; and *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, Valeria Luiselli; and the film, *I Am Not Your Negro*, by Raoul Peck. Another step can be the incorporation of anti-racism workshops and trainings that bring a closer look at how the legacy of racism still haunts us today. In some churches, such workshops and trainings are mandatory for leaders and ministers. As part of the parish’s social justice ministry, the congregation can also

support anti-racism organizations that are seeking to create a more just and humane world.

As we accompany one another, we embrace the words of *Gaudium et spes*, 1: “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.” Through these conversations, we come to understand others who are impacted by racism as *mi otro yo*, or “my other self,” a prophetic insight borrowed from the Mayan tradition and spoken by Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas, a border priest of the El Paso diocese.

The visual text of resistance art, like the biblical text, requires an exegetical approach. It calls us to ask, “What does this art written on the wall or street mean? What is the narrative?” The answer to these queries requires a dialogue with our community. Most works of resistance art tell a story of life and beauty amidst the ugliness of sin and racism. With coded language, colors, shapes, symbols, heroes and heroines, histories, etc., resistance art is a manifestation of the Spirit that proclaims life, and life abundantly. This type of art powerfully declares, “I am here. I matter.”

CHANGING LITTLE BY LITTLE

Resistance art uses images or words that can be and are often repeated. The words *Black Lives Matter* and murals of George Floyd, the man whose death reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement, are on view nationally and even internationally. The names of others who have died at the hands of injustice have become known. The need for change can be highlighted as the preacher looks to the power of the arts to inspire and speak when words are lacking. Such a gaze toward art may motivate the homilist to speak prophetically. Rainer Maria Rilke said, “Where I create, there I am true.” If we have crafted a homily that reflects our personal struggle with racism, then our lives will reflect Second Corinthians 5:17: “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” The faithful have no greater inspiration to take action than the conversion of their preachers. One preaching moment will not resolve a history of racism, but like DiAngelo, it is a start on the continuum as we proceed to live out the questions, trusting that our preparation for this moment will reach the minds and hearts of God’s beloved. ♦

REV. EDDIE DE LEÓN, CMF, DMIN, is assistant professor of pastoral ministry and preaching at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.

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