



A Response to Bishop Robert Barron's Call to the Laity

The Catholic Church's Response to Racism

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An Opinion

Bishop Robert Barron recently published an article on his site *Word on Fire* responding to the question “What are the bishops doing?” with respect to racism. Bishop Barron’s response turned the question around to ask, “What are the Laity doing?” Drawing insights from the Second Vatican Council, he emphasizes the importance of the Laity to the Catholic Church, the baptismal inheritance of priest, prophet, and king, and the call for the Laity to take action. While I wish to charitably interpret the Bishop’s article, I do notice several issues with his premises and wish to address each one in turn.

1. *Bishop Barron conveniently sidesteps the question by calling out the laity while not taking ownership of the bishops’ responsibility to address the issue of racism in the U.S. (and in the Catholic Church).*

The Bishop admits “that there are certain practical steps that bishops can and should take in regard to (racism) . . . We can indeed lobby politicians, encourage legislative changes, and call community leaders together, all of which bishops have been doing.” He then calls out the “taunting remarks” by “primarily lay men and women” who are “putting way too much onus on the clergy and not nearly enough on themselves.”

While I can appreciate his concern that “internet trolls” might not necessarily be putting words into action, I believe that Vatican II’s call for the laity to recognize their baptismal birthright as priest, prophet, and king authorizes them as stakeholders in the Catholic Church to call on church leaders to exercise leadership in society when the church’s moral teachings are being egregiously violated as in the case of racism. The U.S. bishops have been very vocal

and proactive with regard to the unborn, capital punishment, and other matters relating to the respect for life. There has been some action by the U.S. bishops in addressing racism in the U.S., but not at the passionate level of determination and resolve as with abortion, which the bishops have thoroughly addressed and weighed in on legislatively.

In his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II addressed the problem of “structures of sin,” including racism, that promote societal norms and institutions rooted in personal sin that “grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior.” The Pope quotes *Gaudium et Spes*, “Such fundamental equality is one of the basic reasons why the Church has always been opposed to every form of racism” (1987: 29). As Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II provides an unambiguous prophetic voice and serves as a model and witness for the U.S. bishops and how they should speak out against racism. This is exhibited in *Ecclesia in America*, in which he wrote, “The Church’s social doctrine also makes possible a clearer appreciation of the gravity of the ‘social sins which cry to heaven because they generate violence, disrupt peace and harmony between communities within single nations, between nations and between the different regions of the continent,’” “social sins” which include “racial discrimination” (1999: 56, citing the *Catechism*). He then stated, “The memory of the dark chapters of America’s history, involving the practice of slavery and other situations of social discrimination, must awaken a sincere desire for conversion leading to reconciliation and communion” (1999: 58). As a “social sin,” the task of the bishop, as it pertains to the sacraments, is to combat racial injustice both on spiritual and social fronts. Therefore when called upon regarding what the bishops are doing regarding racism, the question should not be sidestepped or projected on to the laity.

2. *I am confused why Bishop Barron is pointing to the laity needing to take action: A simple review of the news would indicate that the laity are on the front lines addressing racism in the U.S. while the clergy have been far slower in their response.*

The laity have been leading bold movements throughout the world following the tragic murder of George Floyd. Many have also taken this opportunity to perform an *Examen* of racial bias and White privilege. Intergenerational conversations among family have challenged unconscious views and biases and promoted long-overdue dialogue that may lead to conversion. Rather than ask the laity what they are doing, Bishop Barron should be commending the laity for leading effective anti-racism movements. Concurrently, the Bishop should be asking, what more can I and my brother bishops be doing in consultation with and collaboration with the laity to more fervently address the problem of racism? Bishop Barron praises the USCCB’s most recent document on racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, but as Daniel Horan notes in *National Catholic Reporter*, it has proven to be a “worthless statement.”

3. *Whether intentional or not, Bishop Barron’s paternal tone underscores the hierarchical structure within the Catholic Church, which further denotes the inequity in the church.*

Admittedly, Bishop Barron qualifies his statement by claiming, “the last thing I would like to do is to stir up any rivalry or resentment between clergy and laity – on the contrary.” However, his explanation of the *clerical* state versus the *lay* state does precisely that: “For the Vatican II fathers, the proper arena of the laity is the *saeculum* (the secular order), and their task is the Christification of that realm. They are charged to take the teaching, direction, and

sanctification that they have received from the priests and bishops and then go forth, equipped to transform the world and thereby find their own path to holiness" (Barron). This is a tired explanation that the laity have heard repeatedly and is not helping the effort to bolster Mass attendance, parish involvement among the non-senior citizen population, and is leading to an increase in "Nones."

Moreover, the tone of the article is a subtly pedantic chiding of critical social media commentators that seems to have the effect of putting the laity in its *place*. Effectively the Bishop is stating "you the laity are responsible for society, and we the clergy are responsible for sacramental life." This dichotomy underscores the hierarchical clericalism that has plagued the Catholic Church for centuries, which Vatican II attempted to rectify and Pope Francis frequently condemns. This privilege is exhibited in Point 1 above that he never truly offers a thorough response on what the bishops should be doing and twists the question as to what the laity can be doing. While the Bishop's intention might not have been to stir up discord, his words and tone effectively do just that.

4. *Whether intentional or not, Bishop Barron's article not only denotes clerical privilege but White privilege.*

Being a White cis-gendered male, Bishop Barron is afforded privileges that are not inherent to those who are neither White nor male. This privilege is evident in the USCCB's document on racism, which does not even mention White privilege. To my knowledge Bishop Barron has not experienced an unlawful arrest, the possibility of death at the hands of a police officer, a denial of a mortgage due to the color of his skin, or being rejected from a position because of his ethnicity or last name. However, many people of color across the U.S. and in the world do experience these realities. For those who are personally affected by racism, the problem is ubiquitous and enraging. Based on the tone of the Bishop's article, the problem of racism does not enrage him, possibly because he does not experience it. However, if he spoke with his fellow prelate Archbishop Wilton Gregory about the topic of racism, he would encounter a very different perspective. Gregory, one of the few Black bishops in the U.S., properly chided President Trump's political stunt at the John Paul II Shrine in Washington D.C., which the President elected to visit a day after he had peaceful protesters decrying the death of George Floyd violently removed for a photo-op holding a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church. The Archbishop states "like all acts of racism, (the death of George Floyd) hurts all of us in the Body of Christ since we are each made in the image and likeness of God, and deserve the dignity that comes with that existence" (quoted in Bailey and Boorstein). Bishop Barron demonstrates a highly theoretical and superficial understanding of racism in his article, and as a shepherd in a multicultural diocese, his White privilege might be preventing him from a constructive and deeply committed public response to the racism occurring in his own archdiocese and in this country.

During this period of monumental challenge to society to confront racism and promote structural reform and personal conversion, the Catholic Church is being called on to be a prophetic witness. Members of the laity have responded in droves as prophets marching together and calling on politicians and law enforcement to enact change. The bishops' response overall has lacked this prophetic zeal. One major exception is Bishop Mark Seitz in El Paso who took a knee publicly to support the Black Lives Matter movement (O'Loughlin).

This witness led Pope Francis to call Bishop Seitz and acknowledge his efforts. I would argue that the Supreme Pontiff is indirectly signaling to the U.S. bishops that Bishop Seitz's witness to social justice is the type of witness and action he would like to see from other bishops.

In response to Bishop Barron's challenge as to what the laity could be doing, I, as a layperson, am exercising my baptismal virtue as priest, prophet, and king to daringly challenge his Excellency to revisit the initial question and work with his fellow bishops to send a strong message both in word and in deed with regard to racism: that it should have no place in the Catholic Church and in society, and that the bishops will work with the laity and with social institutions to promote radical, structural change in this regard. This is a moment when the bishops can exercise humility and allow themselves to be taught by the laity, in particular to learn about the racial struggles being experienced, to enter into the pain and loss of the people they are called to serve, and to allow these exchanges to shake these prelates to their core so that they can respond with the passion of Christ who stands with the marginalized, suffers with his people, and spares no effort to challenge the status quo and social structures of sin that are presently harming and destroying our communities and the lives of people of color.

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