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FR. BRYAN MASSINGALE MALCOLM X AS A MODEL FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHRIST THE KING
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Introduction

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

Good afternoon. I'm very happy to be here once more to introduce our speaker for this program of the Elephants. And in some ways, of course, it's redundant to be introducing Bryan Massingale to this group, because we've had the privilege of hearing him before. So many of you, I'm sure, remember something of his background; but just in case we don't, I should say this first. I became convinced that we should have him again this past June, when I happened to be present at the Catholic Theological Society of America and their national meeting. And Bryan was the outgoing President of that society; and gave his farewell presentation, which the outgoing President always does; and it's a major theological presentation. And I'm sure it's one that the president works on over many months, trying to come up with something that is really a basic theological reflection for our whole Church. And Bryan did that in a magnificent way with his talk about Malcolm X as a model for theological reflection within the Catholic community.

And as one, and I'm sure many of you share this, who went through the period of the civil rights struggle in our country, and Malcolm X being projected very often as one of the most violent persons in the black community, struggling for the rights of black people - later his conversion - but not so many people were aware of that. So it's really quite daring for Bryan to do what he did. And I immediately thought this is something we need to have here in Detroit. Especially, I think, it is very timely, as we proceed with our program of downsizing the institutional presence of the Church, especially in the city of Detroit, where we close schools and parishes, health care facilities, outreach programs, and never ever ask ourselves if racism has anything to do with the presence of the Church in Detroit. And so I thought that Bryan could perhaps, through this reflection, help us to face a question that has been kind of an *elephant in the living room*, I think, for the Church of Detroit. How much racism is behind what we do?

And Bryan is a very challenging speaker. He comes though with a great background of preparation. He grew up in Milwaukee, which is a city that also has faced many of the problems that Detroit has faced. He's a priest of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee; and he has had a very profound influence on the Church in Milwaukee and the Church in the United States, as he teaches in the theology faculty of Marquette University. He is also an associate professor at the Xavier Institute in New Orleans. He's been a consultant on a number of occasions for the Catholic Church in the United States - the bishops' conference. He has been a consultant for the USCCB, also the National Black Catholic Congress, Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Health Association, National Catholic Aged Network. And so he's brought his theological reflections into the Church in the United States in many, many different ways. Bryan has been honored on various occasions, especially by the Catholic Press Association, by St. John's University. Project Equality gave him a religious momentum award. Fairfield University and Cardinal Stritch University both have honored him for his advocacy for social justice. And so Bryan is well prepared to speak to us today, and to provide us with this challenge of using Malcolm X as a way to do theological reflection within the Church, and here especially within the Archdiocese of Detroit. And so I ask you to welcome Bryan into our midst once more today. (Applause)

Malcolm X as a Model for Catholic Theological Reflection Fr. Bryan Massingale

Good afternoon. First, Tom, thank you for your introduction; and thank you for the invitation to be here once again. I'm sure that for many of you, I can speak for myself as well, that you're one of our heroes in the Catholic Church; and you give us all hope. Thank you. (Applause) Also, I want to thank the Elephants for having me back for a return engagement. I must have done something right the first time around. But I also want to thank you, the Elephants, for being a forum for creative thought in the Catholic Church; and also being a forum for radical thought in the Catholic Church. And there's no shame to be called a radical; because, after all, a good Latin teacher will tell you that radical, in its etiological meaning, means going to the root, to the fundamentals; and at times in our Church, we get caught up in accidentals, things that don't really make a whole lot of difference. You keep us focused upon the things that really do matter. And so I thank you for that.

It's good to be talking about Malcolm X as a model for Catholic theological reflection, especially here in the Archdiocese of Detroit, because Malcolm was rooted here in many ways in Detroit. He grew up in neighboring Lansing. He was known for a good period of his life as Detroit bred; and he was the leader of the local Islamic Community, a Nation of Islam community here. So indeed it is good we focus on Malcolm X; and do it here, and especially since you are only the second group that I have ever talked about Malcolm X and his connection to the Catholic Church. It's not necessarily a hot topic of the Catholic Church wants to engage. (Laughter)

The first time, as Tom pointed out, was for my presidential address before the Catholic Theological Society of America this past June, where I had to think about what I was going to do for my presidential address, the topic of that address. And as soon as people saw that the name, the title of the talk in the program, throughout the whole weekend, people were nervous. One even wrote me afterwards and said, "When I first saw the title of your address in the program, I thought, 'Bryan must be out of his mind.'" Another black Catholic colleague, Shawn Copeland, said, "I would *never* talk to a group of white Catholic theologians about Malcolm X; but I'm glad *you* did." (Laughter)

MALCOLM X

Let me give you a little back story that the talk almost didn't happen. It almost didn't happen because, as I was thinking about what the topic would be, I went through one idea, then another idea, and then another idea; and nothing seemed to work. They needed something to put in the program. This idea of Malcolm being in the back of my mind was there. It was one of those nagging things that sometimes, I think, comes from the Holy Spirit; and so I said, "Okay, we'll go with it." And as soon as I gave the title, I thought, "Now what do I do?" Because, for many of you, as for me, Malcolm X was not the role model that was held up for me for emulation; Martin Luther King was the role model. And for most of my life, personally and professionally, my work focused on King, and focused on King's relevance for Catholic theology. But one cannot deny that Malcolm X is a foremost articulator of the black experience of what it means to be African American; or, as he would say, African in America, because he never identified himself as an American, but as a victim of Americanism. And so I realized if I was going to be honest about creating a dialogue between Catholic theology and the black experience in America, one could not avoid or evade the challenge of Malcolm X. Originally I gave this talk a Latin title - I was speaking to Catholic theologians after all - *Vox Victimarum, Vox Dei, The Voice of Victims Is the Voice of God*. And if indeed that is true, then Malcolm's voice, as a foremost articulator of the victims of America, must be an essential part of our dialogue for Catholic theological reflection.

So the question I want to explore with you this afternoon is this: How would Catholic social and theological reflection look if it took Malcolm's voice seriously? Now there are a number of reasons why a Malcolm X would seem to be an unpromising source for Catholic theological reflection. For one there is his unflattering, to say the least, incendiary characterization of white Americans as quote "blond haired, blue eyed, pale skinned devils," and his early belief that they were constitutionally incapable of moral goodness. I think that would make a lot of white people a little nervous, and not wanting to read further. Others would find his characterizations of women problematic: his depiction of women as scheming, cunning, and in need of paternalistic protection rightly rankle and disturb many contemporary sensibilities. And some among us find his righteous anger at injustice hard to stomach. John Neilson, a white Catholic theologian, has accurately named the fear of black anger as a major obstacle to white theological

engagement with black theology in general, and Malcolm X in particular. After all, many blacks here present can attest to the fact we've all been told, "Don't be so angry; and when you calm down and discuss this rationally, then we can continue this conversation." Black anger.

But despite such misgivings, I argued then, and I continue to argue, that Malcolm's thought is a classic. And a classic, in a special sense, as used by a theologian named David Tracy, who said that a classic is any figure, or product, or piece of literature, or movement that is rooted in one particular cultural context, but yet has the power to speak something beyond that culture to something universal in the human experience. And I argue that Malcolm's thought is such a classic. One need not to have experienced directly racial bias to be moved, and even offended, by his eighth grade teacher's dismissal of his dream of becoming a lawyer as an unrealistic career for a nigger. That was what he was told in eighth grade. One need not be a resident of urban America to appreciate his lament that the street hustlers and drug dealers he encountered, perhaps in a more just nation, could have been physicians or scientists. His story of conversion, his consistent openness to truth, whatever its personal cost, is a witness of integrity that speaks across cultural and racial divides. And finally, Malcolm's thought is a classic because it describes America - not *black* America - but the entirety of the American experience, without which we possess truncated and inaccurate understandings of who we are, and why we are, as we are.

So now, with that background, what I am going to do is highlight three principles that give us a way of understanding who Malcolm X was, and what he said, and what he stood for. And then discuss three challenges that Malcolm X gives to Catholic theology and social reflection. And then conclude with why talk about Malcolm X in a so called post racial society. Notice, I said, so called; and also why I talk about Malcolm X - post Obama. After all we've been there, done that, we don't need a Malcolm X anymore. We have a black president now. I don't believe that; but anyway, you'll find out why I say that later.

THREE PRINCIPLES

*The first principle of Malcolm thought was:
the reality of black self-hatred and the need for cultural affirmation.*

Malcolm's typical experience of the African American experience in America is that they suffer from a triad of social misery; namely, political oppression, economic exploitation and social degradation. He doesn't see these three as isolated phenomena, but as interlocking and interwoven systems and manifestations of white racial dominance. But it's essential to note that the primary ill that Malcolm sees afflicting black America stems from a profound *inner* wounding. A plight he vividly described as "a *psychological castration*." Malcolm consistently insisted that no real progress for social justice could be realized unless a corrosive debilitating self hatred in and among black peoples was squarely acknowledged and confronted. On this point he was uncompromising. Hear this pivotal expression of this point of view from an interview he gave just days before his death. Malcolm speaks; he says, "The greatest mistake of the movement has been in trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, and then you'll get action." And the interviewer asks, "You mean wake them up to their exploitation?" And Malcolm says, "No, to their humanity, to their worth, and to their heritage."

Though Malcolm was vehement in denouncing black second class citizenship as nothing more than twentieth century slavery and American colonialism, he just as strongly avowed that the more debilitating barriers to freedom and justice were the inner chains of hatred, and loathing, and worthlessness, which were perhaps even more essential to maintaining social injustice. As Malcolm said, "They just took the physical chains from the slave's ankles and put them on his mind."

Now, for Malcolm, the most striking dramatization of this racialized self hatred and inner estrangement was his eagerness to have his hair combed, that is, artificially straightened in an imitation of white ascetics as standards of beauty. He vividly describes the excruciating painful traumatic process this involved, and then he reflects upon the experience of standing in a mirror to behold his image. And he wrote in his autobiography this: "How ridiculous I was; stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking white. This is my first really big step toward self degradation, when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh, to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brain washed into believing that black people are inferior and white

people superior, that they will even mutilate and violate their God created bodies to look pretty - by white standards." We'll come back to the contemporary relevance of that at the end of my presentation. But it's important now to understand, and Malcolm believed, that such self hatred and physic estrangement might oppress people's passive and complicitness in their own oppression. What this means then is that in our efforts at social justice, we have to be concerned with, not simply ameliorating material conditions of poverty or material conditions of exploitation, we also have to be concerned with liberating people of an inner emancipation, facilitating the outcast belief in their value, their worth and their beauty. That inner emancipation is just as critical as the external works of justice, with which many of us in this room are very familiar with, and have given our lives to. Now I'm going to come back to the contemporary relevance of that later; but this is the first lesson that Malcolm gives us as a fundamental pillar of his thought.

*The second pillar of Malcolm's thought was:
his strategy of critical conscientiousness and ideological struggle.*

As I noted before, Malcolm saw the black experience as characterized by interlocking network of injustices: political oppression, economic exploitation, social degradation. But his major insight and his key contribution was in his strategy to address the situation: the developing of a critical conscientiousness creating what one author calls *a matrix of conscientiousness*. Now the importance of this contribution is best appreciated when you realize that, unlike King and other civil rights activists, Malcolm was not instrumental in passing any significant act of legislation, nor in organizing any mass demonstration. So why do we remember him? When asked of his contributions, one of his close associates stated, "People are always asking, 'What did Malcolm leave?' And I tell people that he left changed minds. You know, he didn't leave no buildings, no roads; he left minds - he literally left transformed minds." This speaker goes on, "The first time I heard him speak, I felt like somebody was literally pulling on my scalp, and just pouring stuff into my brain. It was almost overwhelming that, you know, you were getting so much information, you didn't know how to take it all in. It was - and I am not saying this in any kind of romantic sense, I'm talking literally - it was a learning process." Or as he often told classes that he conducted, he said, "Untruths had to be untaught. We had to be *untaught* before we could be taught. And once *untaught*, we ourselves could then *unteach* others."

Malcolm constantly called for a reeducation of black people so that they could become more politically astute, economically self-sufficient, and socially responsible. Untruths have to be *untold* and *untaught*. That's going to be important when we get to this third pillar, because one of Malcolm's third pillars is that both blacks and whites suffer from a *dual*/brainwashing. Oh! Some of you woke up at the point. Okay! Good! Malcolm's task then involved the rehabilitation of the thinking of our people, in his words, by instilling and modeling thought habits of sustained critical awareness of one's true situation. He constantly exhorted his followers, and especially young people, to: "Learn how to see for yourself and listen for yourself, and then think for yourself; and then you can come to an intelligent decision and action for yourself." He expressed his understanding of the relationship between liberating awareness and effective social protest as follows. He said, "Once you change your philosophy, you change your thought pattern. And once you change your thought pattern, you change your attitude. And once you change your attitude, it changes your behavior pattern; and then you go into some action." Sometimes we want to act without changing our mindset.

Now I'm going off script for just a moment. This is a Holy Spirit moment happening here. Last weekend in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati they had a whole weekend talking on the Church's engagement with racial injustice. And questioner after questioner kept asking me, "How can we be proactive about racial justice when the priests we are getting aren't concerned about it, and our bishops aren't concerned about it?" And they're blaming priests and blaming bishops; and I said, "This is part of our problem in the Catholic Church. We have an attitude of learned helplessness. In other words, if the priests won't do it, and the bishops don't do it, then we feel we can't do anything." This is one of the most pivotal challenges that Malcolm gives to the Catholic Church: to wake up and to challenge our attitudes of learned helplessness by changing our thought pattern, by changing our attitude, by coming to a true and liberating awareness of our situation.

Malcolm was always challenging his thinkers to see beyond the lies, the trickery and deceit of a false American promise. I leave it to you to ask if there is any parallel between that and what is going on in the Catholic Church. Bishop Gumbleton said I could be challenging, so if you don't like it blame him and me.

So the third challenge. And this directly relates to what is going on in the Catholic Church, as perhaps the hardest for a Christian audience to hear.

*The third pillar of Malcolm's thought is:
his critique of Christianity and its white idol.*

A final principle for understanding the spirit of Malcolm is his harsh and devastating critique of organized religion, and especially Christianity. His assessment is blunt and unsparing: "Christianity has failed us." And the reason for this failure is also expressed directly. He asks: "And what is the single greatest reason for this Christian churches failure? It is its failure to combat racism." Now this is going to get a little theological; but you'll see it has a lot of direct practical bearing. Malcolm roots Christianity's failure in its fundamental religious symbol structure, namely its image of God. Now Catholic liberationist theologians and theologies often advance a critique of the symbol of God, arguing that cultural definitions and understandings of the divine can and have served to legitimate various forms of social injustice. For example, the Latin American theologian Juan Luis Segundo forthrightly declares: "Our perverse idea of God and our unjust society are in close and terrible alliance."

And speaking from a feminist perspective, Elizabeth Johnson of Fordham University keenly observes how naming the divine has critical, theological and social consequences. It's a longer quote but it's important. She writes: "How a group names its God has critical consequences. For the symbol of the divine organizes every other aspect of a religious system. The way a faith community speaks about God indicates what it considers its greatest good, its profoundest truth, its most appealing beauty; and, in turn, the image of God shapes a community's corporate identity and its behavior, as well as the individual behavior of its members." She writes: "The symbol of God functions. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions." Now, as I said, this kind of thought is present in Catholic theology. But this insight apparently resists transference to the context of U. S. society; and its endemic racism, as most forms of Catholic theology, even Liberation reflection, have failed to address the similar critique that Malcolm X raised on racial grounds. Malcolm argued that the representation of God in western Christianity doesn't just provide a sacred canopy of justification for white supremacy, he also argued that it serves to bolster the internal sense of white superiority, and the inferiority of black and non-white peoples.

Let me make this plain. Malcolm castigates white Christianity for sacralizing racial injustice and providing religious legitimization for white dominance in U. S. political and economic life through rendering God in exclusively white images. Speaking before an audience here in Detroit he declared, "The whole church structure in this country is white nationalism. You go inside a white church, that's what they're preaching, white nationalism. They've got Jesus white, Mary white, God white, everybody white. That's white nationalism." [It says in my notes that he was greeted with thunderous applause when he said that.] (Laughter) He continues, "Don't join a church where white nationalism is preached, because you can go to a Negro church and be exposed to white nationalism. 'Cause when you walk into a Negro church and see a white Jesus, and a white Mary, and some white angels, that Negro church is preaching white nationalism." But note what he says, that this white image of God affects a dual brain washing. It renders whites unaware of the horrors of racial oppression and black people passive in their wake.

Concerning the pacifying effects of a perverted image of God upon the black conscientiousness, Malcolm was unsparing. In his autobiography he wrote: "Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond haired, blue eyed Jesus. We're worshipping a Jesus that doesn't even look like us. The blond haired, blue eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a white Jesus. And to shout, and sing, and pray to this God - that's his God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout, and sing, and pray until we die; to wait until death for some dreamy heaven; and the hereafter, when we're dead, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets, paved with golden dollars right here on earth."

But while Malcolm stressed the negative consequences of white imagery for non-white peoples, he was just as aware of the corollary impact it has upon the white subconscious. Imaging God as white, Malcolm argued, imprisons white people in a sense of illusion, instilling a false sense of superiority and unrecognized sense of racial entitlement. Speaking for a predominately white audience at Boston

University, he chided them for possessing illusory attitudes of privilege, arguing: "That these stem from an educational system designed to make you think that you are God, that there is no one like you, and everyone is below you." In other words, Malcolm argued that whites are also the victims of a religious system, brainwashed into a false consciousness that no one is, or ought to be, on their level. Little wonder then that many white Christians regard white, Christian, and American as interchangeable and even equivalent identities. Or, as I argue in my book, that many Catholics believe that Catholic equals white. And some of you are nodding your heads and others are looking puzzled.

Let me give you a concrete illustration of what I am talking about when I mean that Catholic equals white. Remember when Pope Benedict visited here in America, and he offered a Mass in RFK stadium in Washington, D.C., and the theme of the Mass was celebrating the diversity of Catholicism in this country? The first reading was the reading from the Acts of the Apostles describing the descent of the Holy Spirit, where all the peoples of the world heard the Gospel proclaimed in their own language. And then the Prayer of the Faithful was offered in a variety of different languages. And the Presentation of the Gifts, the Offertory Song and Procession were led by a Gospel and a Hispanic choir, who were singing the Gospel in spirited Spanish Hymns. As I was watching the Mass on a Catholic cable network that will go unnamed - except its initials are EWTN (Laughter) - after the Presentation of the Gifts accompanied by this exuberant Gospel and Hispanic singing, the commentator, a *noted* Catholic commentator, said, "We have just been subjected to an over preening display of multicultural chatter," And then he said, "And now the Holy Father will begin the *sacred* part of the Mass." (Background chatter)

Now why is that important? Because it is a contemporary illustration of this white idol that Malcolm is talking about. EWTN postures itself as being the media voice and the media presence of the U. S. Catholic Church. We may not like that, but that is what indeed it is. It also postures itself as being renowned for its orthodoxy. That such a statement could be made on a network: *renowned for its orthodoxy*, and the fact that it never has been, and still has not been publicly challenged or refuted by any of the leaders of our Church, tells us that many elites in this Church believe that standing against racism is not a significant badge of Catholic orthodoxy. But *more* to the point, that cultural product, other than white European ones, *are not even sacred*. I could go on; 'cause, after all, we are talking about Malcolm X as a model for our Catholic theological reflection.

There is a major archdiocese in this country, where the ordinary gave liturgical guidelines for worship in his diocese; and among the stipulations he gave was that "clapping, drumming and dancing are forbidden in his diocese, unless the majority of people assembled are African American;" and then he continued, "because *they need* to do that." That statement is so wrong on so many different levels. But again, note that cultural products other than white European ones are not truly, really Catholic, but are Catholic only by exception. This is what Malcolm is talking about when he challenges the idolatry of Catholic belief and practice. And it's a major reason why maybe we Catholics have been slow to engage the thought of Malcolm X. But what he's talking about isn't stuff that took place in the 1960s; we're talking about events that are taking place in the 21st century.

Now having said that, I want to highlight what I consider:

*Three challenges that Malcolm gives
to the Catholic theological reflections and social reflection:*

1. *The first challenge Malcolm gives is the challenge of listening to the voice of the poor and the oppressed.*
2. *The second challenge that Malcolm gives is the challenge of solidarity in a Church undergoing serious demographic change.*
3. *And the third challenge he gives is rethinking solidarity in the midst of social conflict.*

I'm going to talk just briefly about the first, talk a little bit more about the second, and then really brush over the third.

One of the first challenges Malcolm gives Catholics is how to listen and honor a form of discourse and rationality that is not only impermissible in our Church but more often than not even despised. As Catholics and people who are schooled in a certain form of western discourse, we have a tendency to dismiss a lot of what Malcolm says as being overstated, overblown, or even downright false. For example, we might be critical of his harsh dismissal of Christianity. What of those we ask who are inspired by Christian faith, and yet, struggle for social justice. What about those enslaved Africans, who saw through their slave masters catechisms, with their blatantly self-serving skewing of Christianity, and appropriated an understanding of Christian faith that nurtured their hope, and sustained heroic acts of resistance? What about believers like Martin Luther King, who in the name of Christian faith challenged the edifice of Jim Crow segregation and humiliation? We might also ask, "Well, doesn't Malcolm's vow that Islam is the only authentic religion for black people run into immense historical difficulty, given Muslim complicity in the sub-Saharan slave trade?" These are all valid objections, and they do have legitimacy, but I would also argue that they miss the point. Malcolm's articulation, as a voice of the victims, challenges us to attend to a different form of logic and rationality.

As Malcolm declared during a lecture he gave at Harvard University, I'm quoting him here, "What is logical to the oppressor isn't logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor, isn't reason to the oppressed. What sounds reasonable to those who exploit us, doesn't sound reasonable to us. There has to be a different system of reason and logic, devised by those of us who are at the bottom, if we want to get some results in this struggle that is called the *Negro Revolution*." This represents a fundamental challenge, one that's more radical than most of us are willing to admit. The point of his critique of white Christianity is not his logical *assertion*, but the questions he engenders. He calls attention to the uncomfortable, and thus deeply resisted truth, about Christianity has served as a rationalization of vested interests. Malcolm's discourse strips away the facile confidence that we have in the compatibility of Christian faith with social justice praxis. His form of *logic* explains why many black Christians struggle to affirm their allegiance to a religion that justifies the subjugation and murders of their people. Malcolm's *logic* exposes why many black Catholics have abandoned the Church - impatient, furious, and broken hearted by its legacy of false promises. Malcolm's passionate and engaged logic, with all of its richness, and vibrancy, and urgency, exposes how many academic discussions render justice abstract, sterile, and above all, safe.

Let me pause here and go off the script a little bit here. The point of his critique is to call attention to the uncomfortable, and thus deeply resisted truth, about Christianity has served as a rationalization for vested interests. What I discover in continuing to deal with Malcolm X is that he challenges me personally; and he raises an uncomfortable question. If what Malcolm says is true - let me put it bluntly - then what in the hell am I still doing here? He raises an existential question that Christianity is sometimes affirmed too easily, too quickly, want to appeal to the prophetic tradition of the prophets, or Jesus, while ignoring the deep complicity of our Church in any number of social injustices. And if we take that complicity seriously, then what Malcolm gives us is not simply intellectual challenge, but an existential one as well. What in the hell am I still doing here?

I find that many black Catholics get more nervous at this than white Catholics, because many black Catholics start taking this more seriously, okay? What am I doing here is simply more a form of brainwashing. And I often counsel black Catholics that taking Malcolm seriously, and our Church's deep complicity in racism, doesn't necessarily mean that we have to leave; but *it does mean we have to stay in a different way*. It means that the only ethical sane way of staying a member of the Catholic Church is by being a person who is deeply committed, and passionately committed, to its change and its transformation. And that means that one's always going to be on the edge, on the margin, never fully appreciated, never fully integrated, never fully prized or celebrated. That's deep. But that's a challenge that Malcolm gives us.

The second challenge is the challenge of living solidarity amidst profound demographic change. Many of you know that solidarity is a major concept in Catholic social thought. It especially enters our thoughts through liberationist theologians, and became an official part of Catholic social teaching during the pontificate of John Paul II. John Paul taught that solidarity rested upon a deep seated conviction that

the needs of the despised other were intimately bound up with our own. And yet it is this recognition of a common shared humanity that is compromised through systemic racism. Joe Feegan is a noted sociologist who studied racism in depth. He calls this compromised ability to feel the pain of the oppressed, what he calls a social alexathemia. Someone had to create that word. What he means is this: the sustained inability to relate to and understand the suffering of those who are oppressed. And he also argues that so much emotional blunting or callousness is essential for maintaining a racialized unjust society. He says, "Essential to being an oppressor in a racist society is a significantly reduced ability or inability to understand or relate to the emotions, such as recurring pain, suffered by those who are targeted for oppression. In other words, I called this inability to feel the pain of the oppressed other a cultured indifference, a socialized callousness, an unconscious tendency to distance oneself from the plight of those deemed inferior. Now this tendency to distance oneself from the plight of those deemed inferior is of great importance, not only for our Catholic theologians, but for all of us, and for the whole Catholic Church in the United States.

Last May at Notre Dame there was a conference on Cultural Diversity in the Church. And it was revealed that white Anglos, those whom the Census Bureau identifies as white, non-Hispanics, are no longer the majority of the U. S. Church. The Apostolic Nuncio broke the news to us. (Laughter) We are now a majority-minority faith community, a Church with no single majority racial group. We are a Church of racial and ethnic minorities. As one conference participant noted, "We do not have diversity *in* the Church, we *are* a diverse Church." But I think I'm on safe ground that this realization has not yet seeped into the collective American conscientiousness. And the reality of emotional blunting, of not feeling the pain of those targeted by oppression, raises troubling questions, as we contemplate U. S. Catholicism's future.

SOME OF THE QUESTIONS THAT OCCURRED TO ME ARE THESE:

- Will there be a white flight out of the Catholic Church, an exodus of whites out of the Catholic Church paralleling the white flight from the nation's sick cities during the 60's and 70's, when whites abandoned neighborhoods considered too colored?
- Will the Catholic Church be too colored?
- Will white Catholics in the United States imitate the practices of pre-Mandela South Africa, where effective power is kept in the hands of a white racial minority to the exclusion of the darker majority?
- Will U. S. Catholicism, confronted with an inevitable browning that mirrors that of the wider society become an ally in conservative social causes, aligning itself de facto with political parties and social groups overwhelmingly white, who vow to "Take back our country?"

Off the script again. This is not an idol observation or fear. Of concern to many communities of color are recent efforts to revive the Catholic white evangelical political alliance of the Bush era, so called *The Manhattan Declaration* in the fall of 2009, when many noted Catholic bishops and archbishops committed themselves to this kind of evangelical dialogue, where the political issues were going to cooperate with the white evangelicals, while ignoring or overlooking the evangelical complicity in American racism; also the palpable overlap between conservative religious faith, and opposition to comprehensive health care and immigration reform - both of which significantly benefit communities of color - also causes one to view Catholic alliances with such efforts with alarm and concern. The danger, to put it bluntly, is that an uncritical alliance of U. S. Catholic leaders with such conservative causes, marks the Catholic Church as racially insensitive and tone deaf at best; at worst, it represents a de facto support of racially tinged opposition to any initiatives that are offered by a non-white President. And I discussed the racially motivated opposition to President Obama, and its connection to anxiety over the nations changing demography, in my book *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church*. In other words, a deep awareness of our history, as inspired by Malcolm X, reveals the ways in which we've all been malformed, deformed, and conformed by an alien value system that is hostile to our deepest religious values. But without an intentional engagement with Malcolm X, I think we Catholics are going to be woefully unprepared for the challenges of the major demographic shift that is taking place in our country, and has already happened in our Church.

In solidarity amidst social conflict. Here, basically, the point is that Catholic social teaching offers a vision of solidarity without social conflict; that when John Paul talks about solidarity, he's appealing to the social elites to voluntarily surrender their privileges for the benefit of those at the bottom of society. And I point out that the African American social thought severely challenges this point of view, and calls it naïve - Frederick Douglas noting that there is no progress without struggle. And so Catholic social teaching, insofar as it advocates a vision of social progress without social struggle, is unrealistic, and naïve, and inadequate to the challenges at hand; and Malcolm X gives us a way to more accurately frame the challenges that face us.

Why talk about Malcolm X in a post-Obama America?

Some people would say that we are far beyond Malcolm X. Why talk about being a victim of Americanism and American hypocrisy when we have a black man who occupies the nation's highest office? Or as one person wrote me after a talk I gave said, "You people have a black President, what more do you want?" It's out there and I'm just keeping it real. So what is Malcolm's relevance to a post Obama America? My answer is that Malcolm X remains relevant, even post-Obama, because the social conditions that mark Malcolm's life are still existing today.

- As during his lifetime, the myth of black achievement and progress masks the reality of token accomplishment on the part of a few. Malcolm's words then are still relevant today: "And so they come up with only tokenism. A few handpicked Negroes get good jobs. A few handpicked Negroes get good homes, or go to a decent school, and then they use these handpicked negroes. They put them on television, blow them up, and make it look like you got a whole lot of them, when you only have one or two." It's my favorite quote in the whole paper. (Laughter)
- As during Malcolm's lifetime, black and brown children are still too often uneducated and under educated, and during learning environments that would be deemed intolerable for whites, and thus, are stymied in their quest for intellectual opportunities commensurate with their abilities.
- As during his life, our nation's prison population is overwhelmingly young, poor, male, uneducated, black and brown, who experience harsher sentences than white men charged with similar crimes.
- As during Malcolm's lifetime, many poor black, brown, and white disenfranchised people lack the critical skills needed for a true comprehension of their social situation, and thus, often fall prey to unscrupulous demagogues, who feign populous outrage, while pocketing six figure speaking fees. I'm not going to call out Sarah Palin or Glenn Beck right now. (Laughter)
- As during Malcolm's lifetime, racial violence and hate crimes still stain our public life. Burning crosses, hanging nooses, Nazi swastikas are still deployed to remind us of the normative racial ordering that ought not be disturbed. Black and brown, women and men, including many suspected of being immigrants, are targets of vicious attacks reflecting white anxiety over the changing demographics of the country, and hostility toward a non-white President. And finally and perhaps most poignantly...
- As during Malcolm's lifetime, many poor persons of color struggle with a sense of racialized inferiority and lovelessness. In 2006 a young African American high school student, named Kiri Davis, produced a short documentary entitled *A Girl Like Me* - it's available on UTube - in which she explored the struggles women like her experience, as they navigate a world that tells that they do not conform to its standards of beauty. They talk of using hair relaxers, and skin bleaching creams, and of the perception that they are loud, obnoxious and unintelligent. These women speak forthrightly of their discomfort with having "big butts or boobs, or looking too African," and being distained because of being too light or too dark. Their stories are heart breaking and difficult for me, a child of the 1960's, *Black is Beautiful* credo to hear. I wondered as I watched. Have we made so little progress?

But the most wrenching moments occur when the young woman, Kiri Davis, re-conducts the famous dolls experiments used in the 1950's to demonstrate the corrosive effects of segregated environments upon the self esteem of black children. Using a group of 21 black boys and girls, the oldest of whom seems to be no more than four, she shows them a black doll and a white doll, identical in every way except for the color of their skins. She asks the children, "Can you show

me the doll you like to play with? Can you show me the nice doll?" The majority choose the white one. And then she asks, "Why is this the nice doll?" The response: "Because he's white." "And why does this one look bad?" "Because it's black." And then she asks the truly gut wrenching question, "Can you give me the doll that looks like you?" A little girl, no more than three reaches for the white doll, visibly hesitates, and then reluctantly, sadly pushes the interviewer the black doll. The majority of the children, 15 out of 21, preferred the white doll and saw themselves bearing the stigmas associated with the black one. And note, they learned all of this by the age of four, and often as early as the age of three.

Malcolm X is still relevant, even post Obama, because the social conditions of despair, fatalism, resignation, brainwashing, the effects of social marginalization and exclusion still exist. These are signs of our times; and they cry out for Catholics, Catholic theologians and Catholic believers to articulate prophetic responses, responses that not only challenge the material conditions of economic exploitation and political irrelevance, but also facilitate emancipation from internalized shame and inferiority.

I want to end on a note of hope. Toward the end of Malcolm's life he undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca, and he had a life-changing transformation. While in Mecca he experienced peoples of every race and color engaged in what he called the same ritual displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that he said my experiences in America had led me to believe could never exist between black and white. And then, he concluded with this note of hope; he said, "I could see from this that perhaps if white Americans could accept the oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the oneness of man, and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their differences of color. Perhaps," he says, "perhaps." And therein lies our hope and our challenge.

Malcolm reminds us of a core conviction of our faith. Our belief that social life is an unfolding drama, where God listens to the cries of victims, and then acts at times obscurely and imperceptibly, and at times decisively and dramatically, to bring justice for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor. It is our challenge to be alert to how God is acting to bring about that justice even now. Social injustice need not be. Social life is created by human beings. That means that what humans break and divide, we can also, with God's help, heal, unite and restore.

That's our hope. That's our challenge. Thank you. (Applause)

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