

# Healing the wound of racism

In a major speech shortly after becoming attorney general, Eric Holder stated bluntly that America is “essentially a nation of cowards” because we “simply do not talk enough with each other about race.” I concur with his assessment. Dialoguing, not debating, the topic of race would be so therapeutic for our country, yet we shy away from it because it’s too painful and challenging. White Americans say African-Americans are too sensitive and should stop playing the “race card” as an excuse and “get over it.” African-Americans attempt to avoid the discussion because it conjures up painful emotions; or through deep denial, some of us who have been “successful” pretend it doesn’t exist.

Fortunately, on March 28, a group of courageous people gathered at St. Matthew’s Catholic Church to have such a difficult and emotional discussion. What the gathering found was that racism has many faces. This sin is not restricted to just a white versus black paradigm. But weaved into this sin are issues of integration, cultural and ethnic group conflicts, immigration, segregation, genocide, riots, discrimination and the toll on human capital. They also heard firsthand experiences with the sin of racism in the church and its various institutions.

The conference was sponsored by the Murphy Initiative Conference on Justice and Peace called “Overcoming Racism: From Fear to Global Solidarity.” The highlight of the conference was a panel of six presenters, who gave personal testimonies about their encounters with racism and bigotry. One by one, brief but powerful testimonies were given. Oblate Sister Marcia Hall spoke of her experience as an African-American college student at a predominately white college; Oblate Sister Alice Chineworth’s attempt to become a nun was almost stymied by rejections from all-white orders who would not accept “negroes” into their ranks; or Ralph Moore’s recalling his experience as a young boy turning into an invisible bus passenger when the white bus driver refused to acknowledge his existence as he tried to get change to pay his fare. All three recalled the pain, the challenges and the will to overcome those barriers.

The most compelling and vivid testimonies which brought everyone to tears were those of Madelin Martinez, a Latino immigrant, and Nathalie Piraino, a Rwandan

immigrant. Ms. Martinez spoke of being an immigrant and the difficulties she and her sister had in school because they did not speak English very well. She was an excellent student in her country of origin but was viewed here as stupid and was harassed by other students because of her English. She broke down in tears as she explained how this shook her confidence and struck at the core of her spirit.

Nathalie Piraino told a riveting story of how she lost her mother and her entire family to the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda pursuing an agenda of ethnic cleansing. Mrs. Piraino had planned to visit her mother for Easter in April 1994. However, in a telephone conversation with her mother to confirm her plans, she was discouraged from coming and told to wait until Christmas. Her mother was aware of the brewing storm in Rwanda and was wisely attempting to keep her daughter out of the country. Mrs. Piraino reluctantly obeyed her mother and lived. Sadly, in April her mother and the rest of her family were killed. She stated her faith has sustained her through this unspeakable horror.

A price is paid by those on the receiving end of racism and bigotry. The wounds may heal on the surface, but another encounter may rip off the scab and rekindle the hurt. So do not tell that person harmed to stop being so sensitive and get over it. Instead, place yourself in his or her shoes and be courageous enough to enter into a dialogue on why it still hurts and how the wound can be permanently healed.

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