

# Session 1: Living Faithfully

by Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Th.D.

We are gathering over the next few days to celebrate the faith-filled lives SLIDE of 192 years of the Oblate Sisters of Providence and nearly 176 years of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. You've celebrated significant anniversaries before, as this page from the archives celebrating 101 years of the Oblates shows SLIDE; and you continue to be guided by your histories as each congregation tells the story of who they are rooted in those founding moments SLIDE. SLIDE Joined together we see an expanded reach of ministries with shared roots and extended branches, across time and place. You've come together from many different locations, by the remarkable technology that keeps us connected during our most challenging time of the pandemic. Mother Mary Lange and Mother Theresa Maxis have opened our time together with an imaginative view from heaven that places their history and yours in the long view and rises up to look at this history from the perspective of why it matters. In their estimation, you're continuing the work of healing the world and struggling for justice, educating for compassion and journeying toward wholeness, through education and healthcare, advocacy, accompaniment and more. They ask us to think about how our work today is rooted in history.

Consider for just a moment that there are different ways of narrating our common history. SLIDE ENTREPRENEURS Take for example this image narrated by entrepreneurs in business who chart the development of social relationships toward the innovations of an increasing "gross world product". Or this image from NASA that places human history in a tiny portion of this small box in the pictorial representation of the universe as a whole. SLIDE The earth and planetary scientists remind us of the small sliver of human history in the broader scale of life history, earth history and cosmic history (GO SLOWLY you see in this image that very small sliver of human history whose thickness is greatly exaggerated, over and against the much

greater expanse of cosmic history. SLIDE In both time and space we are small compared to the great expanse of cosmic history, and yet any history told from the perspective of our lived cultural and human experience SLIDE will expand the complexity and importance of human history exponentially as this representation of the golden age of Islamic culture demonstrates. A single moment in time and space can expand to fill our horizon, as we marvel at the great possibilities and real challenges of being human.

SLIDE As Theresa and Mary narrate this history, we might pause to consider why this long view matters from a theological perspective, and we might bend our ears to the words of Gustavo Gutierrez who takes a similarly long, broad and theological view to contemplate all history as God's history. SLIDE – GO SLOWLY Gutierrez reads history through the lens of the Bible to see that the work of the Creator expressed in Genesis is the work of a salvific ordering from out of chaos that continues in the salvation of the Exodus event, is given voice in the expression of the prophets and extends with a through-line to the liberating work of Christ that continues in the human project he made manifest. In Gutierrez's vision this history that is ours is God's history: in his words SLOWLY: "There are not two histories – one sacred and one profane...rather there is only one human destiny...The history of salvation is the very heart of human history."<sup>1</sup>

SLIDE A Christian view of history is a story told in a Trinitarian key: that the God of life created from out of nothingness and chaos the possibilities for human flourishing; that humanity, both inestimably precious and unfailingly flawed, is called to be an expression of God's life, and that Christians, drawn by the witness of Jesus of Nazareth and propelled by the Spirit of God's Providence continue in each era the struggle to make that theological reality a human reality. Viewing our world and its history through a Christian lens, Elizabeth Johnson

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<sup>1</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 86.

asks us to see that our lives are made possible by the **Creator Spirit and that “the presence and activity of God pervade the world”**<sup>2</sup> from the most intricate sites of the natural world SLIDE to our most expansive imaginings of our universe SLIDE. “The presence and activity of God pervade the world” SLIDE and we are called to be co-creators of that divine life embracing care for the natural world and all life within it.

What does it look like for us to take the theological perspectives of Elizabeth Johnson and Gustavo Gutierrez seriously? And what is our call if we are grounded in a Catholic theological commitment, like that of Karl Rahner’s, who insists that humans have a distinctive role to play in this one salvation history? For Rahner, the central theological commitment of the Christian tradition was an irreversible, undeniable intimacy between the human and the divine made visible in the **incarnation** in Jesus, but made possible then as a witness to what we too are made to become. “Deep in our own nature, God dwells” Rahner prayed, and he theologized that the incarnation was the most basic datum of human existence from which all of the Christian faith emerged: “Really and radically,” he wrote, “*every* person must be understood as the event of a supernatural self-communication of God.”<sup>3</sup> Rahner also concluded “As God’s real self-communication in grace, therefore, the history of salvation and revelation is coexistent and coextensive with the history of the world and of the human spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, human history is riddled with our incontrovertible failures to be what we were created to be. And, in a sense, SLIDE that is why the work of the Oblate Sisters and the IHM Sisters has been so necessary all the way through these nearly 200 years. While the Church has firmly expressed that “humanity forms but one community”<sup>5</sup> and grounds its commitments in the

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 188.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 153.

<sup>5</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, para 569.

biblical witness that all humanity was made in the image of God, clear sight and open eyes that read the signs of the times holds this theological commitment even in the face of human failings. We are called, in history, by God toward the witness of Christ who calls all humanity to human flourishing.

This theological vision and the deep spiritual commitment that accompanies it is the foundation on which we both celebrate and lament the human histories in which the Oblate Sisters and the IHM Sisters are found. Because the preciousness of life has also, at every turn, been under threat – with both natural causes and human causes. From cholera to covid Sisters have struggled, alongside immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to those at the border today, Sisters have struggled, in classrooms and in the halls of Congress, Sisters have struggled. They have struggled to pursue that vision of human flourishing that is a particular inflection of the Catholic-Christian tradition. SLIDE They anticipated and continued the way in which the Catholic Church articulated this vision in its Social Teaching, captured in a particular way at **Vatican II**: “There must be made available to all [persons] everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family; the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s conscience, to protection of privacy, and to rightful freedom in matters religious too.”<sup>6</sup> Reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel and, guided by Providence, the Sisters have struggled to make God’s flourishing a reality for those whose lives they have touched.

SLIDE In our time together over the next two days, we’re going to hold together these threads of discussion: the historical, the theological and the spiritual. And we’re going to hone in on a particular aspect of the struggle that has become absolutely crucial in our day: the

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<sup>6</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, paragraph 26.

struggle for racial justice. That this struggle continues demonstrates as clearly as anything the deep failures of humanity, the deep failures even of Christians to live up to and live out the call of Christ, the good news of the gospel. But this history of struggle also reveals **a God who accompanies us**. In the words of Katie Cannon, “God’s freely given gift of grace enables us to resist the forces of death and degradation arrayed against us and to affirm our dignity as beloved persons created in the image of God.”<sup>7</sup> We might think of grace as God’s indwelling spirit providing, in the words of Charles Long, “a new power of being.... a power that would sustain [our] being because the powers-that-be would not sustain them.”<sup>8</sup> Grace in this framing is the power to “hold together your personhood” in the face of powers bent on destroying it.<sup>9</sup>

Shawn Copeland reminds us in a new way that reading the signs of the times must include not only the joys of our humanity but the threats to it, and our facing those threats with the witness of the Crucified One as our guide. As Copeland describes: “we cannot but find ourselves standing in a crucified world...” (133) “If we would follow Christ crucified with attention, reverence, and devotion, we would recognize that the tears and blood and moans of the innocent have been absorbed into the air we breath, have seeped into our streams and rivers...into the earth in which we plant and from which we harvest and eat.” (135) In this world of pain and suffering, we are called even today to be followers of Jesus and Copeland reminds us: “If we, who would be his disciples, recall the night before he died, we are led to a table, from a table to a garden, from a garden to a courtyard, from a courtyard to a hill, from a hill to a grave, from a grave to life.” (137) “We who would be his disciples discover our

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<sup>7</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon, “Transformative Grace,” *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pau and Serene Jones (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 139.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Long, Notes from a lecture delivered by Charles H. Long, April 2, 2002, at Virginia Union School of Theology in Richmond, VA, cited in Cannon, page 145.

<sup>9</sup> Drawn from James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991 [1979]), 16.

humanity, our personhood in imitation of him – in taking up our cross in order to transform evil into good.” (142)

And so, in our times, we might see ourselves taking up the cross of our struggle alongside those in our nation who struggle for racial justice – with those who strive for a more just world and for those who struggle to finally transform the evil of a racial project that has been a threat to human life since the founding of this nation. Guided by the theological vision of God’s care for all of creation and humanity within it, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, and the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary have been living witnesses to the possibilities of living faithfully the value of respect for all people and your stories will help us to see the real challenges of doing this work in light of the weight of racial injustice that has been the arc of the American story in which your histories are found. SLIDE: Together we might ask, how has the racial project made it challenging to live the value of respect for all people?

As we’re making our way into this work, I’ve asked us to think historically, theologically and spiritually, and now I want to ensure we’re starting on the same page **theoretically**. Over the next two days I’d like to introduce some key theoretical frames and some terminology with which we can think about history in a particular way. It’s my hope that in the course of these two days the theoretical framing will be clear enough for us to think collectively through the lens that I offer, to increase our ability to think critically about the history we are examining and to increase our ability to think together. With some key terminology, we join this conversation from the many different places we might be coming from, and I hope that we leave with a new set of vocabulary to continue to wrestle with together.

So, I want to start with some further clarification so that we might align ourselves with all those who struggle to finally transform the racial project that has been a threat to human life

since the founding of this nation. SLIDE I want us to consider deeply the question of how the US racial project has been a challenge to Christian ministries; how the US racial project has made it challenging to live the value of respect for all people.

I'm using the term **racial project** following sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant. As contemporary scholars, Omi and Winant suggest that when we're thinking about racism and about 'race' as a strand of our history, it's not helpful to think about race as something embedded in biology or just passed down in culture. It's more helpful, they propose, to think about race as a **human project of categorization**. At any given time, the categories of 'the races' are put forward as imaginative divisions for sorting the human family. In our early modern period, it was botanists and philosophers who were imagining the categories of 'the races' and scholars propose that this happened embedded in a particular moment of our social, political and economic development in the era of European exploration and colonialism, when European explorers and merchants sought to capitalize on newly discovered lands and control newly encountered peoples. SLIDE Back in Europe, botanists and philosophers imagined human differences of the peoples and cultures they had newly 'discovered.' SLIDE MAP They proposed differences on the basis of geography or climate or even food habits, they used linguistic differences to divide the human family, and phenotypical and physiological differences to support their claims about fundamental differences across the human family; SLIDE CHART they organized humans in the same types of categories they were constructing for plants and for the animal kingdom. And as this slide shows, they debated and disagreed as to how many 'races' were needed to organize the whole human family. What Omi and Winant ask us to see is not only that these categories were 'imagined', but also that when people were sorted into these categories then the categorizations became a criteria for distributing or withholding material or

social benefits. SLIDE As a project of colonialism, the early modern racial project held life and death meaning if one was categorized as “Mongoloid”, “Xanthochroid” or “Negroid” – the unusual naming should remind us of the imagination involved in these categories, but how they map on to “Asian” “Caucasian” or “Black” should also remind us of the devastating effects of these imagined categories from the perspective of who were the victors of European global expansion. So, for Omi and Winant the **racial project** has three distinct interrelated moments:

Categories are imaginatively constructed

Persons are sorted into those categories

Benefits are distributed or withheld on the basis of the category one has been sorted into.

The modern racial project that is our heritage was formed at a particular moment in history, with theorists positing that it was precisely the economic and political project of **colonialism** that gave rise to the distinctive ways we have come to think about race. Situating our US history in a broader European history, we remember that Europeans did not always know the rich diversity of the human family, but came to know them in a particular way in the project of exploration, expansion and colonization. Racial categorization was used to construct inherent divisions among humanity which were employed to subjugate some groupings of the human family. Fueled by the project of European colonialism, ‘the races’ served divisive and exploitative ends.

Scientists and scholars today believe that these early attempts to categorize the human family – on the basis of geography or language or food habits or climate or religion – were fundamentally flawed. Mapping human genomes now, scientists can see a few things: first, that the genetic similarities among humanity across the categories that have been constructed as ‘the races’ far outweighs the differences. As scientists describe, READ SLIDE “there’s as much or more diversity and genetic difference within any racial group as there is between people of

different racial groups.” The genetic differences that might be related to climate and phenotype now reflect a global mixing of persons as we’ve been in dynamic movement across the face of the earth for generations. The documentary series, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* helps us to see more clearly the ways our preconceptions about ‘race’ might be investigated in order to begin anew to address racial injustice.

Instead of simply adopting the pre-determined categories we inherit from 18<sup>th</sup> century botanists, sociologists propose that we think about “race” as a series of categorizations that emerge from particular times and places and the material conditions and political struggles of those times and places. For Omi and Winant, then, race is “An unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.” Race “A concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” granting or withholding benefits on the basis of imagined racial categorizations.

It is precisely the material, social and political realities in which race has functioned as categories that divide us that the power of this illusion (of race) is necessary to reckon with. SLIDE Because while we are genetically similar, our history is such that we have become socially differentiated and statistically divided. It is that history, our embeddedness within it, and the possibilities of mobilizing to repair it that our look at Theresa Maxis and Mary Lange will aim to unpack.

SLIDE So we share a theological history: one that is rooted in a Christian vision that the Creator of all desires the well-being of all creation. Guided by the person of Christ and drawn by God’s Providence, the OSPs and the IHMs share the commitment to lives of living faithfully the call of the gospel and the value of respect for all people. But, the signs of the times remind us of

the failure of a nation to live out this call in light of the continued racial injustice that we can see in our historical moment. How did illusory and imaginative divisions among the human family create the realities we encounter today: SLIDES

In health disparities SLOWLY ON THREE SLIDES

In access to education PAUSE

In homeownership PAUSE

And other forms of wealth building. PAUSE

If race is an illusion, how do we see clearly the real impacts of this illusion on material outcomes evidenced starkly in this image of our nations **racial wealth gap**, where the median wealth of White families is 16 times greater than that of Black and Latinx families?

In the next several sessions, we'll explore some of the ways in which past racism is responsible for the realities of educational, health and wealth disparities that we encounter today. And I'll draw attention to at least two different forms of racism: SLIDE personally mediated racism and institutionalized racism. In a short essay that you can easily access by googling the title you see below: (Camara Phyllis Jones, 'A gardener's tale') Jones asks us to consider that while there are certainly forms of interpersonal racism SLIDE – what we usually think of as racism with an identifiable person who holds racist views or undertakes racist actions – there is also a form of racism that is often invisible to us. This form of racism is embedded in the systems and structures of society as bias against and privileges toward one racial group. To be responsive to the call of the gospel in our day will require that we address not only personally mediated racism but institutionalized racism as well. And in our next session we'll unpack further what it means to be attentive to institutionalized as well as interpersonal racism.

The challenge of today is to read the signs of our times in the light of the Gospel. To try to see clearly the realities of injustice and to be the hands and hearts of transformation toward justice. We'll spend our time revisiting the histories of Mother Mary Lange and Mother Theresa Maxis and the history of our nation's racial project that their histories – and ours – are situated within. It is the hope that by understanding our history, where we have come from in a history of racial injustice that we will move more confidently into a future of racial justice. Guided by Providence, committing ourselves again to be co-creators of the one history that is God's history.