INTRODUCTION

I am a white man in the United States. My experience in the context of this nation has been directly shaped by my racial identity throughout my entire life, whether I have been conscious of this reality or not. In fact, my whiteness—or, more accurately, that our society classifies me as something called "white"—has not always been the direct object of my awareness. For most of my life I rarely thought about myself as participating in something called "race," instead viewing people of color as the only ones inhabiting "race" and viewing bigoted individuals (usually white) who spoke racial slurs and overtly discriminated against minoritized communities as "racists." As someone who didn't fit either of those descriptions, I didn't think much about the concepts of race, racism, and racial justice, nor was I really exposed to the reality of their existence in what could be described as my elite and sheltered education. And I know I'm not alone.

The concept of race, perhaps more so than the stereotypical subjects of religion and politics that are not to be discussed in so-called polite company, almost never came up in my household or in the classrooms in which I studied. Sure, my teachers and textbooks presented unthreatening lessons about the progress of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, but there was little that was shocking or inspiring or challenging about what we learned. This complex and significant moment in our past—like the shameful history of chattel slavery and the Jim Crow era—was simply presented as another stop on the timeline of American progress, an

opportunity to pause and reflect on "how far we've come as a society" and to figuratively pat ourselves on the back for how tolerant and inclusive the United States is today. But such presentations, while well meaning, were nevertheless untruthful. Not only was the reality of the past *whitewashed* such that it could be presented as a noncontroversial lesson to a classroom of predominantly white children at a private school in Upstate New York, but the manner in which race was discussed also reinforced a sanitized and oversimplified version of a reality that failed to convey the complexity of racial injustice and white supremacy in our country. Classrooms, like gatherings of family and friends and coworkers, were often treated as a form of "polite company" in which such truth telling was implicitly forbidden. Only many years later would I come to realize that the very same dynamic that perpetuates systemic racism, which harms and disadvantages people of color for generations on end, was also a form of structural injustice that covered over such painful realities for white people, effectively shielding them—shielding *me*—from seeing the world as it actually is and from understanding more clearly how I and people who look like me fit into and benefit from it.

In addition to identifying as a white man in the United States, I can also add some other important qualifiers, including that I am a Roman Catholic—born, baptized, and raised—and, more specifically, I am a Franciscan friar, ordained priest, and professor of theology at a Catholic seminary and graduate school. This part of my identity is important too because my faith is one of the most influential aspects of my life and personal history. I went to Catholic schools my entire life, from kindergarten through graduate school, and was raised in a family that took our Catholic faith seriously; we never missed Mass on the weekend, even when camping in the Adirondack Mountains during summer vacations. My Catholic faith has not only shaped my relationship to God and informed my Christian imagination, but it has also molded my worldview about what discipleship looks like in the

modern world, how the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to be proclaimers of the reign of God, and how our baptismal vocation includes a universal call to holiness.

As important as my faith tradition has been and remains, the Church that I love and have dedicated my life to serving has nevertheless failed me and countless others at times when it comes to addressing racism. I don't recall ever hearing a homily or religious-education teacher talk about racism, racial justice, or white supremacy in any meaningful or memorable way. My home parish is the largest in a midsize city, one that nurtured my vocation to religious life and priesthood, but one that also knew little racial or ethnic diversity. Most of the people who worshipped in my parish looked like me or my brothers or my parents or my grandparents, all of whom are white. There were a few families of color—a couple families of African descent, a few Latinx families, one family of Indigenous people—but their presence rarely registered in the sea of white faces in a parish that considered diversity largely in terms of whether one was of Irish or Italian heritage. Thinking back now with the clarity of hindsight, I realize that the fact of race was always operative and touched the lives of every person in that congregation. It was just that we were by and large protected from seeing our embeddedness in the dynamics of racism due to the unearned benefits of white privilege that shielded us from that truth. Perhaps some willfully overlooked their complicity in unjust structures—small and large—in order not to face the uncomfortable facts of life.

Many Church leaders did not address racism in homilies, faith-formation programs, or public actions because their own whiteness did not make it easy to "see" what was otherwise plain to people of color. Other Church leaders, recognizing that the issue was more complicated than simplistic popular narratives suggested, nevertheless refused to name the reality of racial injustice—both the fact of racism and the fact of white privilege, the two sides of one coin—because to do so required risking their

own vulnerability and putting their disproportionately white congregants in an uncomfortable position.

I recall one instance some years ago when a diocesan priest friend of mine asked for my advice in advance of the weekend liturgies after nationwide coverage of the shooting of yet another unarmed Black man in another state. News coverage of the shooting and the protests that followed dominated the headlines for days. Though he was at first inclined to do so, he was nervous about including a prayer intention for victims of police brutality in the upcoming Sunday liturgy's Prayers of the Faithful. He feared upsetting the largely white congregation, being perceived and accused of "being political," and offending the local police, whom he served as a part-time chaplain. He asked what I thought about including a prayer for the repose of the murder victim and an invocation for reforms to prevent similar violence in the future while also including another prayer for the safety of police as a preemptive form of placation of his would-be critics. I was clear: I did not think this was a matter meriting a "both-sides" response, which is how he framed the proposed compromise. While I have nothing against prayers for first responders and public-safety officials, who have admittedly difficult jobs, this moment called for something else. As people of faith, those who dare to call ourselves "Christian" as followers of Christ—himself an innocent man of color executed by state authorities in his time—we have a responsibility to be bold and direct in our prayer and in our preaching. People would inevitably be upset, because the truth is upsetting. I didn't think it was right to shy away from that uncomfortable truth or to let fear of white discomfort shape our prayer. He took my feedback into advisement. But in the end he decided to scrap both intercessory prayers, preferring not to acknowledge the police murder of an innocent man at all rather than rock the boat of his white congregation's comfort.

This example is one of the least egregious instances of the Church's ongoing complicity in the perpetuation of racial

injustice in the United States. My priest friend was scared and nervous, unsure of how to proceed, and uncertain about how to navigate the pushback he surely would have received had he merely taken the simple step of speaking the name of a murder victim in the form of a prayer of lament and requiem. He was at least aware on some level that he ought to say or do something, but in the end his fear won out and he prioritized the comfort of his white congregation over racial justice. If this kind of behavior is going to change, then white Catholics—lay, ordained, and religious—must unlearn the false narratives that we unwittingly appropriated over a lifetime of education in a culture that promotes whiteness as the standard and ideal; and we must relearn the truth of racism and white privilege that we have shielded ourselves from but that is always already operating in our communities and in our churches.

WHY THIS BOOK?

This book was conceived as a resource for Catholics—white Catholics in particular—to begin the work of relearning what racism in the US context is actually all about. This includes addressing hard realities that white people have typically been able to avoid directly confronting due to the blissful ignorance afforded us by an unjust system of racism in the United States and in the Church. This book is not intended to be a definitive or exhaustive study on racism, racial justice, or white privilege. In this sense, the indefinite article of this book's title—the "A" in *A White Catholic's Guide to Racism and Privilege*—does a lot of heavy lifting and is intended to reflect the aim of this project with sincerity. It is one of many introductory texts geared toward those who are seeking an accessible resource that will not shy away from uncomfortable truths, harsh realities, and challenging questions. For many white people, this may be the first time you have been asked to take a hard look at yourself, your community, your experience, your presuppositions, your prejudices, and your faith through the lens of racial justice. It will be unnerving at times

and unsettling to be sure, but the discomfort you feel as a white person confronting the facts of racism in the American context in general and the Catholic Church in particular pales in comparison to the daily risks, threats, and burdens unjustly placed on the shoulders of women and men of color.

This book is necessary because there are so few resources out there aimed at a general audience on this topic, written from a Catholic perspective, and from that of a white Catholic in particular. There are dozens of outstanding books already in print that have helped me over the years come to understand what my sisters and brothers of color have been saying for more than four centuries but that I was unwilling to recognize or unable at first to see. I am indebted to these insightful texts, especially those written by authors of color, and I will reference and recommend many of them throughout this book. There is also a bibliography at the end of each chapter, which provides a thematic reading list for further study and engagement.

As I have indicated already, the primary audience for this book is white Catholics like me, though I also hope that Catholics and other people of color who pick up this book will find its contents affirming and supportive of an effort to promote anti-racism in our communities and churches. I do not pretend to know the first thing about what it is like to be a woman or man of color in the United States. But I do know a lot about what it is like to be a white person in a society and church that is affected by the realities of racism and white privilege, and I know how hard it is for those on the privileged side to accept the truth of complicity in anti-Black racism as well as the ongoing, intentional, and challenging work of becoming a better anti-racist ally. This book is intended to help guide white people to discover those things that we were socialized to not see, to dismiss, to excuse, to qualify, to rationalize, or to reject outright. It focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on anti-Black racism, given the predominance of this discrimination in the United States, but much of what is discussed can also apply to other people of color in many

circumstances. This book is intended to be a beginning and an invitation to go deeper in embracing the work toward racial justice in our communities as a constitutive part of what it means to be a Catholic Christian in the United States.

WHY ME?

Over the last decade I have found myself convicted by the realities of racial injustice and confronted with my own complicity, privilege, and insulation from seeing reality as it actually exists. It is not easy for me to pinpoint a definitive moment or experience in which I realized there was more to the reality of racism than I had been led to believe (or unconsciously wanted to believe), as if there were a singular instance that hit my psyche and conscience like the flip of a light switch. Some white people have such experiences, but I am not one of them. For me it has been a gradual awakening to the dynamics of the two-sided coin of anti-Black racial injustice and white supremacy.

Over time I came to realize that the God who loves each and every person and creature in the world into existence also calls us to live among one another in a particular way. That way of living, proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets and described in the parables and preaching of Jesus Christ in the gospels, looks very different from the way we *actually live* in the world. We can do better. *I can do better*. I have come to understand that learning about how we live in the world and how God is calling us to do better demands of me more than just doing the personal, albeit important, work of educating myself about racism and white privilege. For me, it means not only *speaking about* racial injustice but also *speaking to* my fellow white people.

I wrote this book because each and every one of us white folks shares the responsibility to work for racial justice and to overcome the pervasiveness of white supremacy in our society and faith communities. Not all of us are called to do the same thing, but each of us is called *to do something*. I am a professor and a priest. My work is primarily in the classroom and in the

sanctuary, teaching and preaching, sanctifying and healing in the name of Christ. As an author, columnist, professor, and speaker who has been invited to lecture around the country and throughout the world, I have a distinctive voice and platform from which to speak. And so I must use my voice and platform for promoting the justice, peace, and integrity of creation that God demands from each of us as people of faith. As the Second Vatican Council has taught us, "The Church always has the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."[1] As a member of the Church it is incumbent on me to recognize that one of the most urgent signs of our times is the persistence of systemic racism.

The philosopher George Yancy, a leading expert on race and racism, addressed white people in the preface to the second edition of his powerful study *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. His invitation is direct and discomfiting, which is precisely the point. And the challenge he poses—representative of a larger invitation to people like me who have long enjoyed the blissful ignorance a white supremacist society affords despite the atrocities experienced on a daily basis by people of color—is one that motivates me in writing this book.

> If you are white, though, know that you are part of a system that would rather you live a lie than risk you seeing the truth. If you are white, you *must* face a certain kind of death—the death of your narrowness of vision, the death of your white narcissism, the death of your "innocence," the death of your neoliberal assumptions, the death of the metanarrative of meritocracy, the death of all of those things that underwrite your white gaze as the only way of seeing the world.[2]

This is the challenge before those who, like me, occupy a social location of privilege in a culture that does not merely harm certain populations of minoritized people but advantages folks like me and reinforces false narratives about merit, deservedness,

and entitlement. And for Catholics in particular, this invitation to "face a certain kind of death" echoes the message of Jesus Christ in Luke's gospel: "Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me'" (9:23). Compared to the injustice and harm imposed daily on our sisters and brothers of color over centuries, the cross we white people must take up in the quest for racial justice is, as Jesus says elsewhere, a relatively easy yoke and a light burden (see Matthew 11:30).

It is not the responsibility of people of color to "educate" white people. The responsibility is our own. There are plenty of resources available, first-person narratives of the consequences that systemic racism has wrought on individuals and whole communities, scholarly studies and sociological analyses of the indisputable discrepancies that exist as a result of such unjust structures and institutions, impassioned pleas for societal change and ecclesial conversion that are all readily accessible—that is, if white people have "eyes to see and ears to hear" the unsettling truth (Mt 13:9–16). It is incumbent on white people to educate and challenge each other, to speak the uncomfortable truth in loving but direct words. This is why I wrote this book.

WHY NOW?

The origins of this particular book can be traced back to the horrifying and tragic murder of a defenseless Black man named George Floyd at the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020. A video capturing the eight minutes and forty-six seconds during which Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of Floyd as the life left his incapacitated body went viral and sparked a national and international response unseen since at least the Ferguson, Missouri, protests in the wake of the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014. But in truth, the size and scope of the protests that lasted for weeks during the summer of 2020 had few precedents, even in the Civil Rights era of 1960s America. As numerous commentators have noted, the protests in the wake of Floyd's murder

included a multiracial coalition and international response unrivaled in the American collective awareness of the ubiquity and deplorability of systemic racism and racial injustice in the United States. Something was different this time. It was not the killing of an unarmed Black man or the deployment of police brutality against persons of color that was novel. Disturbingly, such heinous acts of anti-Black animus, terror, and violence have been happening in the United States since before there was an actual country bearing that name. The difference this time seemed to be the way in which the recorded evidence of the overt violence of racial injustice broke through the societal noise and white denial of the complex structural problem of racism.

This national and global reckoning with systemic racism and police brutality held up a mirror to white America and forced those who had otherwise comfortably avoided facing these facts before to grapple with our social and cultural realities rather than believe the self-referential and self-aggrandizing myths we tell ourselves about American exceptionalism. For many white Americans this was the first time in a long time (if ever) that the shield of white privilege was penetrated by the troubling truth that children, women, and men of color in this country experience the world very differently than the way white people in similar geographic and social locations typically do. The stark injustice, the plain unfairness, the inexplicability of what was captured on film and witnessed by white people—but what has already long been known and feared by people of color—was now more than most decent white people could tolerate. So, why now? On the one hand, I have no idea. Police body cameras and bystander smartphone videos have, for years now, captured similar atrocities in the act. On the other hand, I believe it was simply the last straw. The scale of (white) public opinion had irrevocably tilted, and tilted toward justice in a manner leading to cries of righteous anger in solidarity with those who have been continually harmed by systemic racism.

Many white people have taken advantage of the moment by seeking resources to help them make sense of what they are now only beginning to see with new eyes. Publishers, too, have collectively awakened to the need for resources, especially for those written by authors of color. In addition to supporting and justly compensating writers of color, which I fully support and which was one of the conditions of my agreeing to take on this project, there is also a need for white authors like me to step up and take responsibility for our part in the dynamics of systemic racism that implicate all of us. Part of that responsibility is speaking out and using what social capital and platforms one has to help educate white folks about what we would otherwise prefer to ignore.

So when my editor reached out to invite me to write this book, I had some serious thinking to do. More than a year earlier I had written a more pointed deconstruction of the American bishops' 2018 document on racism.[3] Prior to that I had delivered occasional lectures on racism and white privilege at academic and public conferences, at universities, and in various dioceses around the United States and abroad. As a columnist, I had written multiple pieces on topics related to racism and white privilege. But I had not yet dedicated any book-length effort to the subject.

Part of my answer to the question "Why now?" is to confess that I no longer feel that my periodic anti-racist work is sufficient—and perhaps it never was. While I may have been more aware of the concurrent reality of racial injustice and white privilege in this country and in our Church for a lot longer than many of my fellow whites, the events of the historic year 2020 have fueled a flame of righteous indignation and thirst for justice in me that I cannot ignore. This feeling reminds me of a powerful letter that the American Trappist monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton wrote to Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, on August 23, 1961. Feeling his own sense of divine justice stirring in his heart, particularly as he weighed the inadequacy of the Church's response to the devastating signs of his times—the Cold War, nuclear weapons, the civil rights

movement, the Vietnam War, and so on—he felt that he had to shift his focus as a writer and a public figure. He explained to his friend and fellow Catholic,

> This, Dorothy, is sometimes a very great problem to me. Because I feel obligated to take very seriously what is going on, and to say whatever my conscience seems to dictate, provided of course it is not contrary to the faith and to the teaching authority of the Church. . . . I also know that somehow God always makes it possible for me to say what seems to be necessary, and hence there is no question that I am completely in His hands and where I am and that I should therefore continue as I am doing. But why this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends? . . . As for writing: I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues: and this is what everyone is afraid of.[4]

What Merton is grappling with here echoes in many ways my own experience. I also feel as though I can no longer continue just working on theological monographs and books about spirituality, though they have their place. I also feel the pull of conscience, experience the Spirit of God moving in my heart, calling me to take responsibility and speak from my own experience. Like Merton, I am also concerned about the teaching of the Church, which is why this book is aimed at fellow white Catholics. I want to make clear that, though there also exists in our own time "awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people," on the issues of racism and white privilege, this

does not mean that people of faith and the Catholic tradition do not have something to say and do in response. It means, quite frankly, that too many people of faith—especially white people like me—have not fully engaged the Catholic tradition and done what is ours to do. This book is intended to help encourage and empower the reader to begin to do something, even if that simply means changing the way one sees the world.

Why now? Because, as the Second Letter to the Corinthians proclaims, "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" (6:2). There is no other time than the present, and the present demands something of white folks like me because God demanded it first.

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND AUDIENCE

Before moving ahead to get into the topics at hand, it is necessary for me to say a few things about the language, style, and audience for this book.

First of all, language is never static. The words we use and the terms we invoke shift and develop over time. Such is the case with how race is identified in the English language. In the wake of Jim Crow–era segregation, it was commonplace for people of African descent in the United States to be referred to, especially by white people, as "colored," a moniker that with the passage of time has been abandoned and is now rejected by most African Americans as offensive.[5] Alternatively, the term "Negro" was understood as a more appropriate and respectful term to reference women and men of African descent. This is why one finds the term used not only by white authors and speakers in the early to mid-twentieth century but also by Black women and men themselves, such as one finds in the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. or James Baldwin. Near the end of the 1960s a number of other terms became more commonplace, arising from within the Black community to refer to those of African descent. This is when terms such as "Afro-American," "African American," and,

most importantly, "Black" became increasingly normative. Today, with a growing appreciation for the cultural diversity within the community of African descent in the United States, including those of Afro-Caribbean and other heritages of origin, the term "Black" has become normative, and it is the term I will primarily use throughout this book.

Relatedly, I will sometimes use the phrase "people of color" to describe collectively those who do not identify or are not identified as white. Previously, such groups were referred to frequently in the American context as "minorities," but the shift demographically in the United States toward growing populations of non-whites has rendered that identity increasingly untenable. Furthermore, it is a term that places those who are not identified as white in a subordinate category, whereas "people of color" is an identity that originated in the Black community in the 1960s and has been appropriated by other communities in recent decades.[6] It is important to note that not all non-white people embrace this terminology for collective identity, because it can appear to "flatten" or "homogenize" all non-white persons into some generic category.[7] However, because the phrase arose from within the Black community and is widely embraced today by members of other non-white communities, I will regularly use this term along with the relatively new acronym "BIPOC," which stands for "Black, Indigenous, and people of color," at various points throughout this book.[8]

I will refer to those who identify or are identified as Caucasian, white, of European descent, and the like as "white." I recognize the problems inherent in descriptors that can be perceived as binary, but this is the nomenclature used by a majority of Black and white scholars and anti-racist activists alike, and by many if not most white people when they talk about race. This is the terminology I will use in the pages that follow. I have also made a deliberate choice in how I capitalize certain terms referring generally to a racialized population or to a whole group of people, choosing to capitalize "Black" and not "white" throughout this

book.[9] When I have directly quoted somebody else, I will leave their selected terminology as it originally appeared to maintain the integrity of the citation.

Racism and privilege are tremendously nuanced and complex topics. There is no way in one book to adequately address all the various dimensions, implications, and related subjects that surface when we begin to engage such important, sensitive, and intricate subjects. Therefore, it is important that I state from the outset that the primary scope of this book is limited to anti-Black racism and white privilege in the United States. While there are other communities that can be the object of racialized oppression and even certain minoritized communities that benefit from the stratified system of racial injustice in this country,[10] the long-standing history of relentless anti-Black racism and the continued disproportionate harm inflicted on Black people in this country demands our attention in a distinctive way. I will occasionally make reference to the racial injustice perpetrated against Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and other communities of color, but I have elected to focus primarily on anti-Black racism given its central place in the American context, including the Church. Likewise, when talking about privilege I narrow my focus to those who identify or are perceived as white in this context.

The style of this book is meant to be informative and well researched but also accessible and direct. Although I am an academic theologian by training and profession, I am also a Franciscan friar who is deeply committed to popular preaching (in both liturgical and other contexts) as well as continuing education for all people. In the spirit of both accessibility and directness, I have decided to write this book with a deliberate conversational feel. In other words, I am not merely speaking in the abstract or as an "objective" narrator, but instead wish for this book to be a dialogue between me and you, the reader, as well as between us and the authors I am engaging in the pages that follow.

This style arises from the primary audience for this book. While I am not *only* talking to white people like me, I am *principally*

directing my thoughts and words to this group. There will be times when I simply use the second-person pronoun "you," and when I do so, I'm talking to "you fellow white Catholics." There will also be times when I use the first-person plural pronouns "we" or "us" or "our," at which point I'm speaking to those who share a similar social location to me—again, other white Catholics. The aim here is not, in any way, to be exclusive or dismissive of people in other racial, social, or ecclesial locations. I actually wholeheartedly welcome anyone and everyone who is interested in unpacking the complexity of and implications arising from racial injustice and white privilege to read this book. It's just that given the vast number of resources already available (many of which are included in the bibliography at the end of each of the chapters of this book) and the narrow scope necessary for this one book, my primary focus will be addressing white Catholics in the context of the United States.

It is also worth noting the refreshingly direct words of the anti-racist writer Ijeoma Oluo about the minefield of white people talking about race: "You're going to screw this up. You're going to screw this up royally. More than once."[11] One of the many, many challenges to addressing the persistent reality of racial injustice in this country and in our Church is that many whites are too frightened to say *anything* at all about racism or white privilege out of fear of saying the wrong thing or inadvertently saying something offensive or ignorant. So, in the spirit of Oluo's helpful naming of the proverbial elephant in the room, let us just agree that you (just like me) will inevitably make mistakes, say the wrong thing, feel defensive or exhausted at times, and generally be confused. That is absolutely normal and okay, provided that we are sincerely committed to learning from such mistakes and missteps, rather than using those instances as a form of self-justified indignation and cause for abandoning the important work that still needs to be done. Part of the unavoidable discomfort that I have been mentioning includes the recurring realization that what we have thought, believed, said, and done in the past (and perhaps

also in the present, and quite likely in the future too) arose from and reinforced structures of racism and white supremacy.

Do not let the discomfort of the truth discourage you from the necessary work and responsibility you and I and all white people must do. When we encounter an idea or fact that tempts us to react in a defensive posture, we must stop ourselves. We must sit with it. We must ask ourselves why we are feeling this way. We must consider what presuppositions we were operating with that led us to feel that this new realization was somehow threatening our sense of self or perception of the world. We must process what it means that this new information or perspective is true, has always been true, but that we had been unable or unwilling to see its veracity before. We must take into consideration what it means that, as a white person in the United States, this information or perspective initially made us uncomfortable, but this same reality may have contributed to a lifetime of oppression, discrimination, dismissal, rejection, and threat to life for people of color.

I wrote this book not because I am some expert here to lecture you about what's wrong with you and what's right with me—far from it. This book is only possible because for much of my adult life I have been grappling with a growing awareness of the insidious nature of systemic racism and its twin evil of white privilege, considering my own inextricable role in that twofold context in which I exist, and exploring the fact that the very mechanism of America's white supremacist culture has hidden these truths from my consciousness from the beginning. While I have learned a lot and studied the dynamics of racism and whiteness more than some people, including many of my brother priests and bishops, there is no "graduation" point for a white person, no definitive moment when any of us can claim to be "racism-free." I am still learning and have a lot more to learn. I have screwed up and I am still screwing up, and I know that I have unintentionally hurt friends, colleagues, and strangers by my racist assumptions or unconscious biases over the years. Sadly, for many such

instances, I was never aware enough to realize the harm done in the moment, but there are some examples that I can recognize after the fact, thanks to what I have learned from others along the way, and I will share some of these throughout this book. Like the very core of the Christian vocation, striving to become more and more an anti-racist as a white person in the United States is a lifelong journey of conversion that requires an immense amount of humility and patience. It also requires courage and a commitment to action when called upon to put into practice the anti-racist principles you learn along the way.

ONE

WHAT IS RACISM AND HOW DO WE TALK ABOUT IT?

There are few things more incendiary than to call another person a racist. The reason that many people, especially white people, react so strongly to being labeled a "racist" is that there is a general understanding that whatever the term means, it is not a good thing. In fact, it signals something very, very bad and refers to someone who is, likewise, very, very bad. The moral judgment contained in the term immediately elicits a defensive posture from the accused. Often, the self-defense mechanism that white women and men have been socialized to deploy in such a setting goes into overdrive and, rationally or not, the person accused of being a "racist" (or saying something racist, or doing something racist, and so on) goes into full-on relativizing and dismissing mode in order to demonstrate just how "not racist" they are: *Racist? How can I be racist? I have Black friends. I have a Black spouse. I have Black children. I voted for President Obama, twice! I have never said the n-word. I listen to hip-hop.* And so it goes.

That none of those things, true as they may be in some cases, can inoculate someone from the profound depth and reach of racism—in a society that was built on a foundation of white supremacy and subjugation of anyone not considered "white"—is lost in the moment as self-conscious white people try to save

face. One of the greatest barriers to legitimate, honest, and direct conversations about race, racism, and racial justice in the United States is the defensiveness of those who identify as or are perceived to be "white." The complexity and nuance of terms like "racist" or "racism" are rarely ever engaged because the invocation of those terms tends to send whites into a self-defensive mode that frequently shuts down conversation and prevents any real learning or dialogue. To put it simply, most white people know that to be called a "racist" or to be somehow tied to this thing called "racism" is just about the worst thing one can be accused of in American society. The moral weight of these terms is the only thing that seems to register: racists are bad; therefore, to be called a racist is to be called a *bad person*.

But the truth is that racism is far more complex and insidious than most people realize. If we are going to have any hope of addressing the deep-seated problem of racism in the United States and in the Church, then white people in particular have to willingly risk the vulnerability necessary to learn, to be challenged, and to rethink what they had taken for granted previously. White people in general, and white Catholics in particular, have to accept that they will be made uncomfortable by the reality of racism when they open themselves to the truth that the very structure of racial injustice has prevented them from seeing.

RACISM IS AN ACTUAL CONSPIRACY

I am generally not a fan of conspiracy theories, because most of what is presented under such a heading turns out to be crackpot absurdity peddled under the guise of secret truth. But the fact is that some conspiracies do actually exist, and racial injustice in the United States context is a prime example. A real conspiracy involves *conspirators*, individuals and groups and organizations that work together to accomplish a self-serving end. It is a conspiracy to maintain a certain order, power, privilege, protection, and influence for one population while simultaneously denying all of that and more to another population. Unfortunately for

well-meaning white folks, the conspiracy is designed not only to harm people of color but also to be hidden from the consciousness of white people. Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color have known *forever* the truth of this conspiracy we call racism because they have been the victims of it from the very beginning of European colonization of the Indigenous lands we now call "The Americas." Some collaborators in the conspiracy have been overt and clear about their agenda of dehumanization, of genocide, of white superiority, of cultural Eurocentrism, and of land acquisition and wealth accumulation at the expense of the humanity, lives, safety, and future of whole populations of other human beings. But many whites—especially throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—have remained willfully ignorant about the persistence of the conspiracy. When we unconsciously choose to *not know*, we white people are complicit with racism and remain, to borrow a legal term, "unindicted co-*conspirators*." Just because you do not identify with or in any way support explicit hate groups like the KKK or neo-Nazi organizations does not mean that you are free from responsibility. On the contrary, as we Catholics know well from the Confiteor prayer at the opening of Sunday Mass, we are always responsible for both "what we have done *and what we have failed to do*."

This book is an invitation for white Catholics to take responsibility for what we have done and for what we have failed to do as it relates to racism and white privilege. The process and the conversations around these topics will inevitably make you uncomfortable—there is absolutely no way around that, so it's important that you realize this from the outset. I beg you not to shy away, indulge the temptation to become defensive, or dismiss or rationalize things that may seem new or scary or unsettling to you. As Catholic Christians, it is our baptismal duty to live the Gospel and follow in the footprints of Jesus Christ. The model for how we are meant to live in the world is one that always has one eye on the injustices before us that Christ and the Old Testament prophets who preceded him decried in the name of God, while

keeping another eye on the likely risk, challenge, and rejection that comes with embracing God's will and proclaiming the reign of God. This is not a call to masochism or self-hatred, but a reminder of our vocation to embrace the truth of the world around us and recognize the unjust suffering that afflicts so many. What will be discussed in this book are hard truths, but the fact that they are difficult and challenging does not undermine their veracity. As people of faith, we are meant to face the truth head-on and respond to it in a manner in keeping with the message of the one who is the Truth, and the Life, and the Way (see John 14:6).

WHAT IS RACISM?

Most white people have been taught to understand "racism" in a very narrow way, as a term referring to "bad people." This restricted definition of racism limits the term for description of discrete, particular, and individual *actions*, manifested either in derogatory language or slurs (such as the use of the n-word or invocation of pejorative stereotypes) or in concrete actions (such as the burning of a cross or the physical harm done to people of color). This understanding of what constitutes racism is what Catholic priest and theologian Bryan Massingale calls "commonsense racism." He explains that this limited definition usually describes the following kinds of circumstances:

> Person A (usually, but not always, white) consciously, deliberately, and intentionally does something negative to Person B (usually, but not always, black or Latino) because of the color of his or her skin.[1]

This conception of racism is "commonsense" in that the factors behind the harm done, and by whom and to whom, are as plain as day. On the one hand, there is no disputing that what Massingale describes here is a form of racism. All it takes to recognize it is for someone to have a little common sense. Yet, on the other hand, the narrowly defined circumstances, behaviors, and actions that most white people consider "racist" do not adequately

encompass the deep, ever-present, persistent systems of racial injustice and white privilege that are the social ground and foundation for such individual acts. Massingale points out that while we all can agree on the reality of such particular instances of racism made manifest, there are many problems with such a circumscribed definition of a far more complicated reality. This is why I have described racism as an actual conspiracy: because it is a dynamic that involves many different people working in tandem, whether conscious of the dynamics or not, to perpetuate a system that at bare minimum advantages some and disadvantages others.

For example, this "commonsense" notion of racism might alternatively be described as the "a few bad apples" approach. It suggests that aberrant individuals act out in isolated, particular instances in a manner that is overtly sinful and criminal, motivated as they are in their choice of words and actions by a personal hatred of people of color. While there are undoubtedly such people, this "few bad apples" approach masks over the fact that racism is far more than particular acts of racially motivated animus. As Massingale says, "A focus on individual behaviors and attitudes does not adequately explain the existence of a racialized society, where race is a principal lens for social interpretation and understanding."[2] The hard truth identified here is that what most white people think of in terms of "commonsense racism" is but the most public, blatant, and easily recognizable *symptom* of a reality that is much more pervasive and that this book is intended to help identify and unpack.

To say that the particular actions of racially motivated hatred or violence directed at people of color are symptomatic of something bigger is to say that racism in the United States is systemic. When I talk about racism being "systemic," I am talking about the ways in which racism is present within and throughout the entire system of our society and Church: in our laws, in our social hierarchies, in our storytelling and reporting, in our assumptions about one another, and in all other aspects of our context.

As the sociologist Joe Feagin notes, the nature of systemic racism in the United States is distinctive because our country "is the only Western country that was explicitly founded on racial oppression."[3] When we truthfully consider the history of American society, from its founding by European colonists nearly half a millennium ago onward to today, we begin to see that oppression based on race is not incidental to our shared social and ecclesial narrative. Instead, it is sadly a central and consistent element of our collective identity. It is most clearly recognized in the genocide of Indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, and the mistreatment of immigrants. White people like me have been told and often tell others a version of American history that conveniently leaves out the painful truths of persistent oppression and violence against certain groups on account of their perceived race. We have been taught to ignore or dismiss the pervasiveness of racial oppression that touches every aspect of life in American society. And yet, women and men of color have lived through and still live with the devastating consequences of systemic racism.

To say that racism is systemic is to say that there is an accruing of consequences that arise from our unjust society. Over the centuries, white people have been free from the arbitrary and oppressive burdens experienced by people of color. Whereas Black people in this country were first enslaved and then systematically oppressed by legal and extralegal forms of injustice—segregation, lynching, voter suppression, imposed limits on housing, exclusion from financial investments, etc.—white people have been able to build intergenerational wealth and power. For generations white families have amassed material, economic, and political power; meanwhile, not only have Black families been excluded from similar opportunities, but much of the financial and social capital acquired by white people came at the expense of people of color. The way this unfolds in real time and over history can be very subtle and even imperceptible to most white people—that is, until we train ourselves to see *how* such social disparities between races originate and are maintained.

The Catholic faith has long been described as a "both/and" tradition as opposed to one that understands itself as "either/or." It doesn't take much effort to see why, for one only has to look at some of the basic beliefs expressed in our creeds and doctrines. Jesus Christ is *both* human *and* divine. Human beings are composed of *both* a material body *and* an immaterial soul. The elements of the Eucharist are *both* bread and wine *and* the sacramental presence of Christ. We could go on for a long time with more examples. However, it is precisely in this Catholic spirit of "both/and" that we need to approach the subject of racism. It is *both* the individual "commonsense" instances of racially motivated harm *and* it is a much larger and pervasive system of discrimination, oppression, and—for those who unwittingly benefit from the very same system—privilege. In order to understand better what is meant by the latter description of racism, Massingale suggests that we can think of the reality of systemic racism in terms of a "cultural phenomenon." He explains that, as a cultural phenomenon, racism is "a way of interpreting human color differences that pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life. Racism functions as an ethos, as the animating spirit of US society, which lives on despite observable changes and assumes various incarnations in different historical circumstances."[4]

The thing about culture is that it is not easily identifiable. It is so present and so deeply ingrained as to become like second nature. Culture also shapes interpretation and meaning. Have you ever traveled abroad to a country very unlike your own? Think about the experience of spending time in a notably different culture. At first, things could seem to be very familiar, but upon closer examination you might start to notice differences that strike you as "unusual." I remember the first time I visited England. While there are differences in spoken accents, currency, and the direction of traffic, there are a lot of things that appear at first similar between the United States and Great Britain. First among these is a shared language. But one doesn't have to be in