The True Story—and Tragedy—of Race in America

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This was one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared during 2015 in Crismagazine.com and The Wanderer and at his blog site (skrason.wordpress.com). He makes an assessment, in light of Catholic social teaching, of the race issue in America today. He argues that the typical commentary about it ignores obvious realities, is often driven by ideology and the opportunism of self-appointed racial spokesmen, and ignores serious, deep-seated problems in minority communities with tragic consequences.

The rhetoric of leftist politicians, commentators, and “civil rights spokesmen” after events of the last few years has created a picture of America as a deeply “racist” nation. The impression conveyed is that things are no better, possibly even worse, than they were in the Jim Crow era. This is after decades of civil-rights laws, affirmative action, public policies supposedly geared to improving the conditions of minorities, and a stigmatization of racial prejudice almost beyond any other behavior. The lack of a sense of history is almost flabbergasting: the present-day, in effect, is equated or compared unfavorably to a time of lynchings, water fountains separated by race, restrooms and public libraries restricted to Caucasians, brutal responses to the least sign of interracial male-female affection, and what can only be described as visceral and irrational nastiness over the least sign of the Negroes of the old South appearing “uppity.”

To be sure, there is still racial prejudice today. The college fraternity incidents that were in the news indicate that. The racially charged rants of college freshmen, however, simply pale in comparison to Jim Crow. In fact, the widespread attention these episodes receive illustrates the tendency since the 1960s to make small things into big issues and to come to sweeping, unmerited conclusions when it comes to race. Even innocent perceived slights in an inter-racial context are often held to be “racism” and blown vastly out of proportion. In much of the black community and in the opinion of the left-tilting media there is the belief that police departments are deeply “racist,” even though many have minority officers in substantial numbers and the encounters, including police shootings, that have inflamed anti-police sentiment (such as in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere) hardly involved innocent or unthreatening individuals. Nor do
the claims of widespread, unwarranted targeting of minorities stand up. One thinks back to federal studies in 2002 and 2005 that debunked claims of “racial profiling” when police pulled drivers over. While arrests and searches of minorities were found to be more likely than with Caucasians, one has to keep in mind the high crime rates in so many of the urban neighborhoods involved. Similarly, the claim that minority students are unfairly singled out more for suspension and expulsion in public schools has to be weighed against the greater tendency of such youth, especially males, to get into trouble and their disproportionate juvenile crime rates.

That gets us to the crux of the real tragedy concerning race in America today—the one which the “civil-rights industry” (some of whose leaders have gained prominence and wealth by jumping on alleged grievances) and leftist politicians (who mine minority communities for votes) ignore. The family breakdown that was first discussed by the Moynihan Report in the 1960s, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” has continued and accelerated, with a national 70 percent illegitimacy rate (reaching 90 percent in some urban areas). Fatherlessness abounds. The devastating results are there for anyone to see: high crime rates and pervasive gang activity (with other blacks the main target of the crimes), high incarceration rates (one in three boys born in that demographic group will go to prison), a disproportionate percentage of children living under the poverty line, a disproportionate percentage of people trapped in government dependency, and lagging educational attainment.

“Civil-rights” leaders and opportunistic politicians, in effect, have told people in the black underclass for a long time that they don’t have to be responsible. All of their woes are caused by “racism,” instead of their actions or inaction. They have bestowed upon it what I call an “angel complex.” The effect of this is just to encourage more anti-social, irresponsible, and destructive (including self-destructive) behavior. They have also led it to believe—contrary to the clear evidence—that they can only be victims of racial prejudice, never perpetrators of it. So, the Justice Department doesn’t make an issue of election-day harassment by members of the New Black Panther Party. The Obama administration hardly mentions interracial crime targeting Caucasians, even though the federal government’s own crime statistics indicate that it is much more frequent than the other way around. Then there are ongoing racial-preference policies in the workplace and education (even if the most egregious schemes in public higher education have been disallowed by the Supreme Court). If it were the other way around these would be considered blatant racial discrimination that would bring down the full force of federal and state law. School textbooks exaggerate the role and contributions of members of racial and
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other minority groups (even homosexuals) in American history, while dismissing or even denigrating towering figures like our Founding Fathers. They even treat as a given such spurious claims as that Africa was the cradle of the human race and civilization. It’s interesting that surveys are increasingly showing that Caucasians believe themselves to be victims of race prejudice, even while many “civil-rights” apologists insist that such “reverse racism” isn’t possible. Curiously, while these same apologists are eager to accuse the Republican party, conservatives, Tea Partiers, etc. of “racism,” they conveniently ignore the fact that the Democrats were the party of Jim Crow (let’s recall the one party “solid” Democratic South) and, before that, of slavery.

What has happened with race in America is what Pope St. John XXIII cautioned about in the encyclical Pacem in Terris (#97) regarding ethnic and other minorities in the developing world. As a reaction to their problems or past injustices, they “frequently tend to magnify unduly” their people’s characteristics, exalting them “even above those human values which are common to all mankind.” In effect, in the name of equality, propagandists have made minorities (racial and in other categories) unequal—not just by officially favoring them, but also by viewing them as not subject to the same moral and other weaknesses and temptations as the rest of the human race and as not bound by the same moral law. Racial equality and minority advancement, to say nothing of brotherhood, cannot result from pretending that a situation is other than it is or routinely pointing accusing fingers without justification. Good race relations must proceed from truth. Human dignity is not a one-way street. It cannot be achieved for minority groups by denigrating what’s called the “majority”; it has to prevail for both. As Blessed Pope Paul VI said in the encyclical Populorum Progressio (#44), a better world must be brought about “without one group making progress at the expense of the other.” There are some who think that it’s just for historically dispossessed minorities to thump the other side when they get the chance. In fact, not only is that not true justice but also shows an absence of the social charity crucial for good race relations and for a sound political community generally.

If their leaders really cared about the black community they would stop using “racism” to excuse everything and sincerely dedicate themselves to what its people desperately needs (and what has been emphasized by thoughtful “conservative” commentators from within it and its soundest religious leaders): spiritual and moral renewal.