

It Shouldn't Have Been a Surprise

Sisters and brothers, as our Nation watched with horror on Wednesday, the unimaginable scenes of insurrection from our Nation's Capital where our entire Congress was held hostage by the actions of a deluded and deranged mob, many of the wisdom figures of our day – and many of us – came to the same conclusion: *It shouldn't have been a surprise.*

Fr. Bryan Massingale, from Fordham University, author of Racial Justice in the Catholic Church, put it well when he wrote on Wednesday:

“This is the inevitable result of four years of lies from President Donald Trump. Four years of the president demonizing his opponents. Four years of unaccountable abuses of power. Four years of reckless rhetoric and thinly veiled threats of violence. Four years of stoking of white racial resentment, anxiety and fear. Of naked appeals to his thugs and inciting Proud Boy gangs to “stand by.” And of repeated refusals on his part to promise a peaceful transfer of power. Make no mistake, this is the only place that the presidency of Donald Trump could lead: a violent assault upon the nation's democracy.

We cannot feign surprise, because for years, the core of Mr. Trump's appeal has been stoking white resentment at the changing face of America. What we saw today is a clear declaration that many white people would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy. If democracy means sharing power with people of color, especially Black people, then they want no part of it. Today is the inevitable consequence of the nation's tolerance of white racism.”¹

Sisters and brothers, the wisdom figures of our day are also reminding us the Donald Trump is not alone responsible for the horrors of Wednesday at the Capital:

Fr. Massingale states:

“What we witnessed in Washington is a direct consequence of four years of enabling complicity, cynical appeasement and cowardly silence. It is the consequence of those who knew that the president is grossly incompetent for the office, but said nothing. It is the result of those who repeated his lies about a stolen election to curry short-term favor. It is the consequence of political leaders who refused to confront his unprecedented destruction of democratic norms out of fear of a presidential tweet.”

But Sisters and Brothers, as disciples of Jesus, as Roman Catholics, as members of All Saints Parish – we must go a step further. The wisdom figures of our day agree. The horror of the events at the Capital on Wednesday is also the consequence of the compliant silence and even active support of religious leaders including significant numbers of our Catholic Bishops and Catholic Pastors who refuse to confront the cancer we experienced in the last four years. Here the wisdom of Catholic Moral Teaching is right on the mark. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that one shares in the evil of another by: “...omitting the counsel that would have hindered the wrong-doing” and, by “silence, by not presenting, by not denouncing.” Pope John Paul II declared: “Truth is the mother, the basis and foundation of Justice.”

What we have witnessed this week is the consequence of four years of the truth being ignored, trampled and dismissed; and blood is on the hands those political and religious leaders who were silent – or worse – actively supported his lies... ..

Sisters and brothers, as we know, when all is said and done, our leaders – both political and religious – are so often mirrors of ourselves. At this moment it seems crucial for each of us to look deep in our souls and ask ourselves: *How silent have I been? How have I afraid to speak the truth... out of fear of rejection of those around me?*

My guess would be, our Pope Francis – certainly a wisdom-figure of our day – was not at all surprised with the Wednesday events at our Capital. In his book Let Us Dream – the Path to a Better Future, released December 1, a book I've been quoting a lot lately, he points out in so many ways – but writing well before the events of this week – that if we demonize Wednesday's mob and don't go beyond that, we are neglecting to understand the deeper roots of this evil.

He writes that the rise of populist politics globally in recent years, is a genuine anguish:

“Many feel thrust aside by the ruthless juggernaut of global technocracy. Populisms are often described as a protest against globalization, although they are more properly a protest against globalization of indifference. At bottom they reflect pain and loss of roots and community and a generalized feeling of anguish. Yet – in generalizing fear and sowing panic – populisms are the exploitation of that popular anguish – not it's remedy. The often cruel rhetoric of populist leaders, denigrating the “other” in order to defend a national or group identity reveals its spirit. It is a means by which ambitious politicians attain power.

Today, listening to of the populist leaders we now have, I am reminded of the 1930s, when some democracies collapsed into dictatorships seemingly overnight. By turning the people into a category of exclusion – threatened on all sides by enemies, internal and external – the term was emptied of meaning. We see it happening again now in rallies where populist leaders excite and harangue crowds, channeling their resentments and hatreds against imagined enemies to distract from the real problems.

In the name of the people, populism denies the proper participation of those who belong to the people, allowing a particular group to appoint itself the true interpreter of popular feeling. A people ceases to be a people and becomes an inert mass manipulated by a party or a demagogue. Dictatorships almost always begin this way: sowing fear in the hearts of the people, then offering to defend them from the object of their fear in exchange for denying them the power to determine their own future.”²

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Sisters and brothers: Where do we go from here?

Today, we officially conclude our Liturgical celebration of Christmas, New Year and Epiphany with the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The theological meaning of this event sheds deep insight on where we need to go as a church and – yes – even as a Nation and world if we are going to move beyond the dangerous situation in which we are presently – as a Nation and world.

But, at first sight, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, might not only seem irrelevant to the present moment, but also a bit odd...

If Jesus had public relations handlers, they never would have allowed him to get into the river and be baptized by John. The four Gospel writers are uncomfortable – even embarrassed – with the episode of the baptism. *Why would Jesus – Emmanuel – God with us – need to be baptized for God's sake?!* Who were the people jumping into the river? Sinners, hoping that John would clean them up...; turn their lives around. Like the people we read about in the arrest records in the newspaper: people guilty of drunk driving (on a donkey or camel maybe?), bad checks, petty larceny, assault.... Some notorious sinners and some... for crimes of the heart. *They knew that they weren't clean.*

Jesus didn't seem to be too concerned about all that — *God-being-with-us* (which is what Christmas is all about) includes *God-being-in-the-river-with-us ... in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life!*

As Jesus walked all wet out of the river – after being baptized by John – he had a profound mystical experience: in the form of a dove, the Spirit of God revealed with a voice from Heaven:

“Jesus – you are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased!”

Jesus' baptismal experience awoke in him his ultimate reality as the beloved of God and that his Mission was to awaken others to our ultimate identity: *that we are the beloved of God!*

Thus: The Church is born: the awakened Jesus awakens others, and those others awaken still others. In this way communities are built-up, traditions developed and the powerful healing message of God's love, compassion and forgiveness is passed from generation to generation!

This deep awakening to our ultimate identity been witnessed so prominently in modern times in our Nation by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Gospel Vision of our Nation – our world as a beloved community of sisters and brothers – children of the one God – living in peace and justice. As we near the Birthday Anniversary of Dr. King, we might reflect on his vision... reflecting on the words of John's Epistle: “Let us love one another for love is of God!”

King states: “Let us hope that this spirit will become the order of the day. We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation.... History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals who pursued this self-defeating path of hate.”³

And then, Dr. King quotes from Arnold Toynbee:

"Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."

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Where do we go from here?

Pope Francis concludes his book by pointing out that the final step in moving from this crisis into something new, is putting our love into action in very practical steps to address all of the anxiety and to serve the common good:

“By making the integration of the poor and the care if our environment central to society’s goals, we can generate work while humanizing our surroundings. By providing a universal basic income, we can free and enable people to work for the community in a dignified way. By adopting more intensive permaculture methods for growing food, we can regenerate the natural world, create work and biodiversity, and live better.

“All this means having common-good goals for human development rather than the false assumption of the infamous trickle-down theory that a growing economy will make us all richer. By focusing on land, lodging, and labor we regain a healthy relationship with the world and grow by serving others.

“In this way, we transcend the narrow individualist framework of the liberal paradigm without falling into the trap of populism. Democracy is then reinvigorated by the concerns and wisdom of the people who are involved in it. Politics can once again be an expression of love through service. By making the restoration of our people’s dignity the central objective of the post-Covid world, we make everyone’s dignity the key to our actions. To guarantee a world where dignity is valued and respected through concrete actions is not just a dream but a path to a better future.”²

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In concluding his remarks last Wednesday, Fr. Massingale challenges us...

So brothers and sisters,

“the fundamental question confronting the nation is: Will we strive to be a nation of liberty and justice for all? Or only for some? For those who are white and angry? For those who look like and pray like us? Until we face those questions, we dare not act surprised by the horror that we saw at the Capitol today. Or when it happens again.”¹

Amen!

¹ Bryan N. Massingale “The Racist Attack on our Nation’s Capital” AMERICA MAGAZINE, January 06, 2021

² Pope Francis w/ Austin Ivereigh, Let Us Dream – The Path to a Better Future Simon & Schuster, 2020

³ “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” Speech delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned, at Riverside Church in New York City, April 4, 1967