

Educating for Recovery from Racism:

A Reflection on the Work of Fr. Clarence Williams, Jr.

By Jane M. Deren, Ph.D.

Fr. Clarence Williams, Jr., a noted African-American Catholic priest, has written and spoken widely on racism throughout the U.S. He has developed a process for “recovering from racism,” based on a pedagogy that posits that education for racial justice cannot be based on simply sharing information. Because racism has been so ingrained into our culture, public life and national psyche, Fr. Williams believes we must take our students, church members and community groups through a transformative journey that engages them on many levels if we wish to promote racial justice. In his work, once again we see that education for justice needs demands a commitment to an ongoing, supportive exploration of emotional, psychological, cultural and spiritual realities as well as of social and political realities.

Fr. Williams, who has written a work book on this topic (see information below), believes that many Americans suffer from racial dysfunction because of negative internalized beliefs about race. He looks at racial formation identity as a part of social and personal identity: “The family and community formation of racial identity prepares the individual for his/her operating in the larger society and the global arenas.” Unfortunately, the family and community are often agents in promoting a racial hierarchy. Fr. Williams believes that recovery from racism is similar to recovery from other dysfunctions: groups share the journey of recovery through “insight into the causes and dynamics of the dysfunction and the emotional encouragement of others who are struggling to overcome negative habits.” Recovery from racism, like other recoveries, demands a constant effort to correct one’s erroneous belief systems, in order to inform and reform negative thought and behavioral patterns.

Borrowing from the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Fr. Williams sees the stages of recovery as moving from denial of collusion with racism and racist structures, to anger, bargaining, depression, and then acceptance of the social and personal sin of racism, followed by re-engagement (a commitment “to collaborate in life-giving relationships”), forgiveness (“The decision to forgive is one of the most powerful acts in recovery from racisms.”), and finally witness (sharing our recovery and hope for racial justice with others “in our circle of influence, our communities, and our global village.”). His workshops are focused on this process of recovery, and his workbook helps leaders take participants through the process. While all educators may not be able to go through this particular process, everyone concerned with racism and the need for racial healing and racial justice needs to understand the challenge, and the importance, of doing intensive reflection on how racist attitudes develop in all of us and blind us from seeing sometimes overt and sometimes subtle racist systems and structures in this country and in the global community.

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