

SAVE OUR SOUL!

On the occasion of the recent holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, I read an interesting reflection on MLK by Father Bryan Massingale, theology professor at Fordham. He refers back to King's often forgotten emphasis of the civil rights movement, not only to overcome racial justice, but "to redeem the soul of America." He saw the interconnection of racial justice, economic exploitation and expansive militarism. Of course there are some Whites who think the racial issues have been resolved and that advocates of diversity and inclusion are today the real agents of racial division. After the inauguration, one man said that it finally feels safe to be a white man again. To me this seems like fear of change, of losing power, of safety and security being tied to dominance and exclusion.

It is not easy to explain what the "soul of America" is really about. We are an immigrant nation, built up on varied ethnic, religious and national perspectives. All of it has enriched the common good. Yet, there have been many false steps long the way. The slavery of foreigners, the destruction of the people and lands of native America, the relegation of women as second class citizens. Jews, Blacks, Asians, Latinos all have to try extra hard to enter the fabric of America. There has been an ascendancy of corporations which rule our values through advertising, consumerism, and an appeal to the American Dream. The rich have become richer and the poor, as well as the middle class, have become weaker. Our tastes, our desires, as well as our lifestyles have been controlled and manipulated.

Contrary to some critics, I really believe the American people are basically good and want to do good. We have come from hearty stock who have struggled to be at home here. As a child of the depression, I know the difficulty my parents and grandparents endured in the years of the depression and World War II. Catholics, in my case, had to work hard to impress the Protestant nation that they were true Americans. When I was growing up, becoming a policeman, firefighter, sanitation worker, possibly a politician or a priest were the main avenues of acceptance. Then Catholics were on the front lines of the war, fighting and dying for their country.

The War led to many changes. America became more affluent, the GI Bill helped immigrants to go to college, the suburbs developed. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life prospered and Catholics developed schools, hospitals and other public serving institutions. While inner city immigrant churches started to die, churches in the suburbs really grew. It was now respectable to be a Catholic

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Christian. But they paid for the assimilation by losing their distinctive Catholic customs. The election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 was a significant moment.

As Catholics became highly educated and affluent, they often saw themselves on a higher plane than the minorities they left behind. Religion became more individualistic and less communal. Comfort, acceptance, as well as superior separation became normal. Meanwhile the official Church was growing up. Pope Leo XIII in 1890 returned us to the social gospel of Jesus. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) pointed us back to the gospel, to an active liturgy, to acceptance of the modern world. By then many American Catholics had become more American than Christian.

Today American society is split and polarized. Since the rise of terrorism, we have become fearful, clutching on to what we have, often resenting what those lower than us do not have. Proponents of an American Christian Nationalism want their way of life protected, are afraid of foreigners and migrants, live in comfort and security. They worry more about the price of eggs than the possible end of life due to climate change.

However, there are those who understand the gospel. They take the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-8) seriously and know we are called to care for the least of Christ's brethren (Matt. 25). They see themselves called to resist the secular status quo, to face the injustices facing any of their fellow citizens. Some of this resistance is going public. Bishop Marianne Budde, an Episcopal Bishop, implored the President to have mercy on people. The American Bishops have finally gotten beyond their one issue campaign to speak up for the migrants in human needs. VP Vance accused them of seeking money. None of this is new in our Biblical tradition. In the Hebrew scriptures, the Jews were heeded to care for the aliens, widows and orphans. The prophetic movement is part of our tradition. Elijah spoke to King Ahab, Nathan to King David. Then, in the gospel, John the Baptist spoke up to King Herod, and Jesus taught a way of life, a different way to be human.

What can you and I do? We have been given a two-fold program. Action and Prayer! Action may mean speaking up, taking part in meetings, overcoming our fears. And Prayer makes this possible. We burn out and give up if we do not have a real prayer life, a vibrant relationship with God with Jesus as our way. Practices of Religion itself are not enough. We must learn what it means to truly believe and to sincerely hope, and have the courage to overcome our passivity. Edmund

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Burke, Irish born member of British Parliament, is famous for saying that the only way that evil will overcome is when good people do nothing. Education, reading, knowing what the Church teaches are all part of this too. We must avoid denial, despair and cynicism if we are truly followers of Christ. Give it a thought (and a prayer). Encourage me with your notes sent to me at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org.

Fr. Timothy Joyce, OSB, STL

Please note that I do not speak on behalf of Glastonbury Abbey, the Archdiocese of Boston or the Catholic Church, though I hope my faith is in harmony with all these. Any error in judgment should be credited to me and not anyone else.