



**WE, TOO, SING AMERICA:**  
**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE MUSEUM OF**  
**AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE**

January 15, 2017

An Essay Written in Commemoration of the  
88<sup>th</sup> Birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968

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## I. The Bishops' Meeting, the Election, and the Museum

(1) The new Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture has stirred a great deal of interest. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose 88<sup>th</sup> birthday we celebrate today, who had a dream of racial conflict resolved in harmony, would surely see this Museum as a significant contribution to the fulfillment of that dream. As an African American and as a Catholic Bishop, I have looked forward to visiting the Museum and examining its treatment of the Church. After the presidential election, I traveled to Baltimore for the fall meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Afterwards, I traveled to Washington, D.C., where I once served as personal theologian to James Cardinal Hickey, to visit the Museum. Once in the Museum, I realized it would take many visits to comprehend its overwhelming sweep and wonder. I

also quickly realized that there was very little in the Museum about the Catholic Church or about African American Catholics. The Church is in the Museum more by its absence than its presence. The Museum aims to be a museum for all people, a timely reminder that the African American story is at the heart of the American story. Since the Museum only displays 3,500 of the 40,000 objects in its collection, I hope there will be more about the Catholic Church and African American Catholics in future exhibits.

(2) This journey came in the wake of the most controversial, the most negative, the most emotional, the most painful, and the most polarizing presidential campaign in my adult lifetime. It was a campaign during which the racial divide in the United States was never far from the attention of the ever-vigilant media. Would this election affirm or repudiate the historic presidency of Barack H. Obama? Would the Democratic candidate be able to motivate the unprecedented numbers of African American and young voters to return to the polls? Could the Republican candidate attract significant African American voters with his question, "What the hell do you have to lose?" Or, could he be victorious without their votes? A number of commentators suggested that there was a degree of racial tension in the air fueled by some campaign rhetoric and a long, sad season of altercations between law enforcement officers and People of Color resulting in the deaths of youthful African Americans and the fatal assaults of White policemen. It was in this context that the Bishops chose to celebrate the opening Mass of our General Assembly at St. Peter Claver Parish, a modest church in Baltimore's African American community. A striking Afrocentric crucifix, with a corpus carved by Juvenal Kaliki, of Tanzania, was used during the Mass. It was also on display throughout the meeting of the Bishops' conference. Because of its small size, many may not have noticed it. Following the longstanding custom, at the Mass many of the Bishops stood during the singing of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (the African American National Anthem).

We sang, in part:

"Lift every voice and sing,  
Till earth and heaven ring...  
Stony the road we trod,  
Bitter the chast'ning rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?  
God of our weary years,  
God of our silent tears,  
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;  
Thou who hast by Thy might,  
Led us into the light,  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray."

-James Weldon Johnson, (1871-1938)

(3) The election results surprised and even shocked pollsters, late night talk show hosts, “Saturday Night Live,” and many voters who anticipated a different outcome. The results may not, however, have surprised the winner’s enthusiastic supporters, who had stood in line for long hours in order to overflow his rallies and announce their unconditional commitment to him and his election. Though I and, I assume, other Bishops participated in a number of informal conversations during the Bishops’ meeting, there were no public discussions of positive or negative views about the one who won or the one who lost. Several post-election surveys indicated that 55 percent of Catholics voted as Republicans and 45 percent voted as Democrats. (At this point, however, we should probably be slow to put much trust in polls.) It would be presumptuous to suggest that the votes of the Bishops would be in similar percentages. It would be equally presumptuous to think that all of the Bishops voted for the same candidate. Apparently, 43 percent of eligible Americans, including Catholics, did not bother to vote!

(4) The guests at a dinner I attended with friends from my years in Washington were Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, with very different backgrounds, who were eager to discuss the election. Following my general practice, I never said for whom I voted (major party candidate, independent, or write-in). More than once I heard exchanges such as, “How could you, as a Catholic, have voted in good conscience for him? He is going to be the worst president ever.” “How could you, as a Catholic, have voted in good conscience for her? She would have been the worst president ever.” “What do the election results say about the changing character of our country?”

(5) Happily, the conversation turned to my planned visit to the Museum the next day. One of the guests had been present for the gala dedication and grand opening on September 24, 2016. She said that it was quite moving to see President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama and former President Bush and former First Lady Laura Bush presiding at the dedication amid warm and friendly exchanges. When another guest commented that it was truly great that Barack Obama, the first bi-racial president, was dedicating the Museum, someone pointed out that the true engine behind the project was President Bush who signed the bipartisan legislation in 2003 at the urging of Congressman John R. Lewis (Democrat, GA.), over the strong opposition of South Carolina Senator Jesse Helms (Republican). In fact, the impetus for this Museum started one hundred years earlier when African American veterans of the Civil War urged the erection of a memorial to Black veterans in 1915. Though Leonidas C. Dyer, a Republican Representative from Missouri and an ardent foe of the widespread practice of lynching African-American men, introduced legislation for a monument in honor of Negroes\*\*\* in 1916, it gained no support. Efforts by writer James Baldwin and baseball player Jackie Robinson in the 1960s to press for a museum did not prevail. Finally, in 1986, Congressman Mickey Leland, a Democrat from Texas, sponsored and successfully passed legislation for a museum. But he perished in a terrible plane crash in 1989 and Congressman John Lewis aggressively took up the baton.

(6) This should not come as a surprise considering the longstanding thesis that People of Color had no history and no culture. The towering figure, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), is depicted in the Museum standing in front of the Declaration of Independence, of which he was the principal author, and bricks representing the hundreds of enslaved human beings he “owned.”\*\* He wrote, “Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture... Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. — Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry. I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that blacks... are inferior to the whites in the environment both in mind and body.” (Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIV, The Avalon Project, Yale Law School)

(7) The German idealist philosopher, Georg W. F. Hegel, (1770-1831), was a contemporary of Jefferson, whose rigorous writings have influenced generations of American Christian theologians. In “The History of Philosophy,” he states that Egypt is not really a part of Africa and that people from Sub-Saharan Africa have no history, no culture, no collective memory and, for all practical purposes, lack

what is needed to be properly called human. He dismisses all of African history and culture saying, “At this point, we leave Africa not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit.” (cf. Olufemi Taiwo, “Exorcising Hegel's Ghost: Africa’s Challenge to Philosophy”). We can thank the astounding achievement of the Museum’s Founding Director, Historian Lonnie G. Bunch III, for proving just how wrong Jefferson and Hegel were. As he said, the primary goal of the Museum is “to help all Americans remember and, by remembering, to stimulate a dialogue about race and help foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing.” (Mable O. Wilson, “Begin with the Past,” p. 17)

(8) One of the dinner guests, who had visited the Museum earlier, asked me if I was going to the Museum by myself. When I replied, “Yes,” he said, “That’s good.” When I asked why, he said, “Well, for me, the experience was emotionally very stressful. Like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the September 11, 2001 Memorial and Museum, and the National Civil Rights Museum built around the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was violently murdered, this Museum confronts visitors with disheartening realities. Some people leave the lower level History Galleries in tears, or in shocked silence!”

## **II. The Museum: A Visual Wonder**

(9) As I approached the Museum, designed by Tanzanian native and British architect David Adjaye, I was struck immediately by its unique design and location. It is a visual wonder. The architect clearly did not want to repeat the white marble design typical of structures on The Mall. It is next to the Egyptian-African style obelisk monument to our first president, George Washington, who “owned”\*\* enslaved human beings\* at his estate in Mt. Vernon, Va. The memorial to our third president, Thomas Jefferson, who “owned”\*\* enslaved human beings\* at his estate, Monticello, is nearby. A Greek temple on the horizon is the monument to our sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, who issued the historic Emancipation Proclamation, while arguing that perhaps the best thing for the “freed” former enslaved human beings whom he considered “inferior” would be their return to Africa. (It was from the steps of this monument that Dr. King proclaimed, “I have a dream!”) Also within sight are the Capitol and the White House, which were both built, in part, by enslaved people. These buildings, as well as the largely African American city of Washington, can be seen from within the Museum through strategically placed windows that look out onto the National Mall and beyond. These vistas fulfill the Museum’s commitment to use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American.

(10) Drawing closer to the imposing structure, I was initially unaware that the most critical portion of the Museum is in several lower levels that are not in view, almost like a sunken ship. The upper level consists of three upside down pyramid-like layers that complement the nearby obelisk. The outer walls are ornamented with a bronze colored aluminum grillwork. This three-leveled structured Corona echoes elements found in African art and architecture at once suggesting hands lifted up in prayer, a Yoruba crown and figurative verandas found in Nigerian Yoruba royal courts. The outer panels of the grillwork suggest the West African grillwork crafted by African people in Louisiana and South Carolina. The skin of the Museum shimmers in shades of sepia, copper, deep red, and gold, depending on the sunlight, offering a silent tribute to the creative craft and building skills of African Americans long “hidden in plain sight,” since enslaved human beings were never given credit for their craftsmanship.

(11) When I headed down into the three lower levels of the History Galleries, I realized that sixty percent of the Museum is underground in the largest exhibition in any Smithsonian Museum. Though the Gallery space is vast, it has low ceilings, dark walls and many passageways. Mr. Adjaye, the architect, said he wanted visitors to feel like they were entering a crypt. It also made me think of the lower level of the European vessels used to transport enslaved free human beings across the Atlantic Ocean in the Middle Passage. Almost everything on these levels is displayed in small areas that require the visitor to move

around walls and passageways that are deliberately dark and cramped, just as the enslaved free human beings chained side by side and on top of one another in unspeakable squalor were cramped into darkness. Graphic commentaries paint a picture of the sickness and death on the transport vessels. Mothers giving birth while still in chains. The sick, the dying, and the dead were thrown overboard into shark infested waters. An estimated 2 million people lost their lives during the Middle Passage of this African Holocaust.

### **III. The History Galleries**

(12) The three underground History Galleries are the heart of the Museum providing a heart-wrenching record. They cover three periods: “Slavery and Freedom,” “Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: Era of Segregation 1876-1968,” and “A Change in America: 1968 and Beyond.” In these galleries, it becomes apparent that money and the complete disregard for the value and dignity of a human person were at the center of an enterprise that uprooted more than 12,500,000 West Africans from their homeland, family, culture, language, and religion and brought them, in chains, to the Americas. Once here, men, women, and children worked unceasingly under the hot sun and the lash on sugar cane, cotton, and tobacco plantations; and all manner of other difficult labor were rewarded with degradation, humiliation, and backs torn open and bleeding from the taskmaster’s whip, while plantation owners grew wealthy. In “The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism,” Edward E. Baptist examines America’s original sin as a huge financial enterprise bringing great wealth to those who “owned”\*\*the people who served as the machines of capitalism.

(13) Examining the first federal census of 1790, I noticed that it does not mention African people at all. It records only “free white males of sixteen years and upwards, including heads of families,” “free white males under sixteen years,” “free white females,” and “all other free persons.” “Slaves”\* are mentioned at the end without any mention of age, gender, or place of origin. They were simply property. I can understand very well why the enslaved African people in the diaspora compared their unhappy fate to the Children of Israel in bondage under the Pharaoh of Egypt, and sang, “Go down Moses, Way down to Egypt land, Tell all pharaohs to let my people go!”

### **IV. The Role of the Church**

(14) In the History Galleries, it is not possible to miss the important role played by religion during the History of African people in America. They brought African traditional religions with them. By some estimates, 30 percent of enslaved people from Africa were of the Islamic faith. It is a surprising turn of history and grace that the enslaved human beings took comfort in variations of Christianity even though their oppressors could not see the contradiction between their Christian piety and their absolute cruelty to their human “possessions.” Individuals who felt “like a motherless child a long way from home” found, in Christianity, a way to make a way out of no way. Excluded from mainline Protestant churches and Catholic churches, they established their own Baptist communities and Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which remains the heartbeat of many African American communities to this day. The resilience and the forgiving hearts at Charleston’s Mother Emmanuel AME Church after the June 17, 2015, slaughter of the innocent by the self-proclaimed White Nationalist and confessed murderer, Dylann Roof, bears witness to this heartbeat.

(15) As I examined the exhibits about the strong power and support of the “Black Church,” for People of Color after emancipation, the references were always to Black Protestant Churches not Black Catholic Churches. The Black Baptist Church raised up many prophetic voices and dynamic leaders, like Dr. King. The Museum does not select any African American Catholics for comparable recognition. White Catholics could not easily be prominent leaders of the abolitionist movement since Catholic families, religious orders, and bishops (including John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore) “owned”\*\*

“slaves”\* of their own. Beginning with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, I found the occasional White Catholic priest, nun, or lay person appear in photographs and videos of civil rights demonstrations. In several places, mention is made specifically of the Sisters of the Holy Family, founded 20 years before the Civil War, as a community specifically for African American women (rejected by white religious orders) by Henriette DeLille, a free Woman of Color in New Orleans. But I did not see any pictures of Mother Henriette DeLille, Father Augustus Tolton, Pierre Toussaint, Mother Mary Lange, Julia Greeley, or Sister Thea Bowman in the History Galleries. All are African-Americans proposed for canonization.

(16) I did find a small shrine containing an altar and votive candle stand from St. Augustine Parish in New Orleans, where Catholic Free People of Color opposed all Jim Crow racial segregation laws. In 1895, when the Archbishop of New Orleans, Francis Janssens, established a separate parish for Black Catholics in the Faubourg Tremé neighborhood, St. Augustine’s Creole parishioners asserted their right to worship in an integrated community. Black Catholics competed with White Catholics to buy pews, Black Catholics succeeded in getting half of the center pews for their families and all of the seats along the side aisles for enslaved people. This produced, for a time, one of the most integrated Catholic congregations in the nation.

(17) Then, as now, African American Catholics were all but invisible in the larger, influential Black Church. At the same time, African Americans were and remain all but invisible in the larger, influential Catholic Church. The September, 2016, CARA study on Cultural Diversity in the Catholic Church in the United States notes that, of the nearly 70 million Catholics in America, only about 2,900,692 are African Americans.

#### **V. It Would be Alright if He Changed My Name**

(18) Moving through the History Galleries, it is difficult not to notice the evolving names. In different moments in history, we see African, Negro, Colored People, blacks, Black People, People of Color, Afro-American, Africans in the Diaspora and African American, or a plea for just plain American. Many years ago, a Bishop asked me, “Have all ‘blacks’ now agreed that they wish to be called “African Americans?” He was surprised when I said, “No, they have not and they probably never will.” The changing names is a part of the outward expression of the unique inner struggles of the people of African ancestry to find a way to speak about their experience in this country, from the Middle Passage, to enslavement, to the era of Jim Crow, to bondage in urban blight in northern cities, to the fragile gains of the Civil Rights era, to participation in middle class educated, professional life, to the racial divide of the present day. In different periods of this history, one can see a people going through a process of self-affirmation. Uprooted from their homelands, they have moved from a negative self-identity, in which they almost rejected their own identity as incompatible with the Western European-American hybrid culture which surrounded them, to a total rejection of that culture and its world view. They have gone from a complete immersion in what is sometimes called “the Black Experience,” to the personal appropriation and transcendence of that experience, leading to the emergence of Black consciousness and a growing use of the name African American.

(19) When the aggressive Black Power Movement of the 1960s first began to use “black” (“I’m black and I’m proud!”) in place of Dr. King’s eloquent use of “the Negro,” or “Colored People,” everyone did not embrace that change. Many individuals and geographical communities continued their customary use of the Portuguese derivative “Negro”\*\*\* (insisting against great opposition on an upper case “N”), or “Colored People” because they were uncomfortable with (even embarrassed by) the word “black.” As the word “black” gained greater acceptance in the 1970s, the people to whom it referred often preferred to write it with an upper case “B,” to give the name more dignity. They were frustrated seeing statements about “Jews, Hispanics, Asians, and blacks.” Writers argued, in vain, with editors of journals and

newspapers insisting on an upper case “B.” They also tended to disdain the term “blacks,” preferring Black People or Black Americans. A key reason for the emergence of “African American” is the fact that it provides a sense of origins (Americans of African origins) similar to “Irish Americans” (Americans of Irish origins), while conceding that Africa is a continent and not a country like Ireland. Of course, with the name African American, favored by many professionals, came an upper case name. A number of “white” or “European-American” commentators find this entire evolution of names incomprehensible. “You wanted freedom, you wanted rights? Well, now you have them. Why not just call yourselves Americans, like everyone else?” The response is often, “Maybe we will, just as soon as we are treated like everyone else!” I find myself thinking of Nina Simone’s lyrics, “I told Jesus it would be alright if He changed my name!”

## **VI. Face-to-Face with Dear Emmett Till**

(20) For me, personally, the most devastating experience in the History Galleries was surely coming face-to-face with the original coffin of dear Emmett Till, which I had not seen in sixty years. In August of 1955, when he was 14 years old, Emmett’s family in Chicago, where I grew up, sent him to Money, Mississippi, to visit relatives. While there, he was suspected of flirting with a 21 year old white woman. The woman’s husband abducted the young man, beat him beyond recognition, shot him, and dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River where it was found several days later. When his hideously disfigured body was returned to Chicago, to his grief stricken mother, Mamie, she insisted that the casket should be open for a public viewing “so the world can see what they did to my child.” My uncle, who was born in the south, took me and my brother, Lawrence, to the visitation. We stood in line for hours outside of A.A. Rayner Funeral Home. My uncle repeatedly told us, “I don’t want you to ever forget this night!”

(21) When we finally reached the bier, I peered into the glass coffin and beheld the terrifying remains of a vicious murder. He did not look like a human being! Emmett’s mother was sitting in a chair sobbing uncontrollably, crying “My baby, my baby, why, why did I send him down south?” I looked into her red-rimmed eyes not knowing what to say. As we rode home, my uncle told Lawrence and me, “When you grow up, whatever you do, don’t go south, don’t live or work in the south. The same thing could happen to you. They would just as soon kill you as look at you. Heed my words!” I have never forgotten those words. I have never forgotten the totally unrecognizable, bloated, mutilated face behind the glass in the coffin. I have never forgotten the raw anguish on Mamie Till Mobley’s face. It all came back to me when, as a Bishop and a former priest of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Gabriel Montalvo, said to me in 2000, “Your Excellency, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II has appointed you to serve as the second Bishop of Lake Charles, Louisiana.” For a moment, I was stunned, “Don’t go south! Don’t go south!” Nevertheless, I did go south where, fortunately, much has changed. I embraced the People of God with an open mind and an open heart. Happily, while there were a few very painful experiences, the vast majority of the people of Southwest Louisiana warmly welcomed me. My five years serving there were happy ones. I came to know members of the Christian Faithful who have remained dear to me to this day.

(22) Those responsible for the lynching of Emmett Till were tried and acquitted. Later, protected by double jeopardy laws, they admitted their guilt in a 1956 article in *Look* magazine and remained free. Of course, dear Emmett was only one of an estimated 3,446 African Americans lynched between 1882 and 1968!

(23) As I walked through the History Galleries for a second time, I noticed a number of exhibits that required greater study, including an important section on Frederick Douglass, who escaped from bondage in Maryland and became a social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. There was a display of a beautiful silk lace and linen shawl given to Harriet Tubman by Queen Victoria. Harriet escaped from

enslavement in the early 1800s. She returned to the South so many times, leading other African Americans to freedom, that she became known as a "conductor" on a metaphorical Underground Railroad. I also saw how easy it is to walk by exhibits without reading the lengthy explanations or watching the informative videos. As I passed a full size railroad car, I heard a number of people observe, "Oh, that must be Harriet Tubman's Underground Railroad." In fact, it is a real train car displaying the segregated, crowded, unsanitary sleeping conditions endured by African Americans traveling by night, while paying the same fare as White passengers in comfortable deluxe cars.

(24) When I left the History Galleries, I realized that many more hours had passed than I realized. Walking out, I thought of Pulitzer Prize winner Suzan-Loei Parks's remarkable theater piece, "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World AKA The Negro Book of the Dead" (a 1990 work recently revived at New York's Pershing Square Signature Theater). The work is as relevant as this morning's newspaper. In the play, various African American characters carry a large green watermelon across the stage from scene to scene. This delicious fruit, used in the past and even in the present as a belittling racial stereotype, becomes a potent symbol of the burden of racial oppression. One character tries to move but he cannot because the heavy watermelon on his lap makes him a captive. He says, "This (burden) does not belong to me. Somebody planted this on me. On me, in my hands." When he finally stands up, he is still not free.

(25) The lower and upper portions of the Museum form a coherent whole. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of it as two Museums in one. It takes a great deal of time to examine everything closely, read the commentaries, and watch the videos in the lower History Galleries. But those who fail to take the time will be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually impoverished.

## **VII. The Upper Galleries**

(26) As you make your way up to the upper floors that fill the Corona, there is a noticeable change in the feel of the Museum. It is lighter in color, more spacious, more upbeat, and even more entertaining. While these Culture and Community Galleries are filled with astonishing exhibits, many of which document the struggle, pain, and suffering that African Americans endured in every area of life, they are not dominated by the dark shadow of apartheid-like systematic and systemic racism that pervades the History Galleries. These galleries display the triumph of the human spirit over the gravest adversities. The vast upper floor galleries are devoted to the truly astounding contributions People of Color have made in the areas of music, art, sports, and the military. Depending upon the visitor's age, there will be surprises around every corner. No major achievement in television, Broadway Theater, recordings, or championship sports goes uncelebrated.

(27) In the Community Gallery and the Cultural Gallery on levels Three and Four, the role of religious institutions, entrepreneurship, art, recreation, the pioneering achievements in television, music (including jazz, be-bop, hip-hop, rap, opera and other classical music), motion pictures and the daily life for African American people are all examined in depth. In the art section of the Museum there is a painting, "Stations of the Cross" by Allan Rohan Crite, the dean of African American artists, renowned for his Afro-centric religious art. His mantra was, "I tell the story of man through the Black figure." But, when he painted "Stations," this devout Episcopalian chose to paint Jesus and Mary with European features. The history of educational institutions, the Black press, business, unions and organizations like the National Association for Colored Women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are creatively displayed. The struggle of African Americans in the military (including the heroic achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American military aviators in the Armed Forces) is critically examined. Great achievements in sports from Jackie Robinson desegregating Major League Baseball in 1947 to Althea Gibson winning at Wimbledon in 1957, to the triumphant story of Muhammad Ali, to the contemporary tennis triumphs of the Williams sisters are all there. Also present is Louis Armstrong's

golden trumpet, Chuck Berry's red Cadillac Eldorado and the set of the famed Oprah Winfrey TV program. (The Museum's theater bears her name in appreciation for her gift of \$21 million of the Museum's \$540 million cost.)

(28) These upper galleries contain far more than this. I do hope that younger visitors will not be so enthralled by these amazing, encouraging, and delightful displays that they will avoid or rush through the true core on the Museum on the lower levels in order to revel in the exciting panoramic vision of the great accomplishments of a gifted, free, and hope-filled people.

(29) My thoughts turned back to the presidential election and the meeting of the American Bishops a few days earlier. Once the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States is inaugurated, many people will be watching to see what he means by making America "great" again. Some commentators think several of his public statements and a number of his proposed cabinet members evoke an era when America was primarily "great" for those who lived on one side of the racial divide. Other commentators suggest that the new president's postelection words and deeds indicate that "great" may mean building on the greatness of our commitment to a more prosperous economy, increased employment, greater attention to the needs of the poor, and bridging of the racial divide. The leadership of the new president and the responses of the American people may result in positive or negative future exhibits in the Museum.

### **VIII. The Church and the Museum**

(30) During our Baltimore meeting, the Bishops of the United States discussed their intention to explore ways of addressing the racial divide that was a concern of many during the presidential campaign and remains a concern of some after the election. There are plans for developing a new Pastoral Letter as the first major follow up to the 1979 Pastoral, "Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day," which condemned racial prejudice as a sin and a heresy that endures in our country and in our Church. In addition, a group of bishops has been asked to help Catholics focus on peace and justice in our communities. The goal is to promote active listening to the concerns of people in neighborhoods where there are tensions between people of different races and between local citizen and law enforcement. The Church wishes to contribute to building stronger relationships among people of different races in our communities in order to anticipate, prevent, and even resolve recurring conflicts. The Bishops approach these efforts chastened by the awareness that many Catholics never heard of "Brothers and Sisters to Us" in 1979 and that many of the goals proposed in that Pastoral Letter have not been seriously pursued or achieved.

(31) Knowledge can play a central part in bridge building and fostering peace and justice in our communities. The extraordinary Museum of African American History and Culture is a wellspring of knowledge that could be a valuable resource for bishops and the Catholic Church seeking to bridge the racial divide and find new paths to peace and justice in our communities. In the years ahead, many Catholics will have the opportunity to visit the Museum. However, millions more will not be able to. Many can benefit from the Museum by visiting on-line, through videos, books, and articles.

Here are some practical suggestions:

1. Many bishops frequently travel to Washington, D.C. for meetings at the Bishops' headquarters. If they were to make a visit to the Museum a priority, they would be moved by what they would learn. They would see a clear connection between the history presented and the Gospel challenge to Christians to work for reconciliation and harmony among all people.

2. Many priests, deacons, sisters, and the Christian faithful also often have reasons to be in Washington, D.C., a vacation destination for many Americans. Representatives of diocesan leadership could plan a summer visit to Washington placing a Museum visit at the center of their itinerary. Because of the

scope of the exhibits, visitors of all racial and ethnic backgrounds will leave with a deeper appreciation of our common humanity, a more accurate understanding of past events, and a renewed motivation to obey the mandate of Jesus Christ, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

3. Catholic Colleges, high schools and elementary schools, and diocesan offices of education could benefit immensely from the Museum’s educational resources which include print materials, videos and on-line connections. The unique resources of this Museum can be brought into classrooms, adult education programs, parish bulletins, and other educational ministries.

4. Catholics who make use of the Museum’s resources should complement the Museum exhibits by documenting the many important, more recent efforts made by the Catholic Church to correct past acts of institutional bias and prejudice. This will be an incentive to contribute to the Church’s contemporary efforts to convey to all people the inclusive and welcoming message of the Good News.

5. Bishops, priests, sisters, deacons, seminarians, teachers, parents and students should learn the stories of great African Americans not mentioned in the Museum, including: Mother Henriette DeLille, Father Augustus Tolton, Pierre Toussaint, Mother Mary Lange, Julia Greeley, and Sister Thea Bowman. (All are candidates for canonization.) Communities who have artifacts relating to these heroes of faith might consider offering them to the Museum for consideration. The faithful should be urged to pray for their canonization.

6. While this Museum is exceptional, there are museums and historic sites concerning African Americans in different parts of the country. A visit to any one of them would be equally valuable as a starting point for dialogue. (e.g., The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and the Museum of African American History in Boston.)

7. Creative ways of sharing the Museum’s vision can be used with members of law enforcement, civic leaders, and neighborhood communities of diverse racial backgrounds. (e.g., Show the PBS video, “Still I Rise,” which examines African Americans since the death of Dr. King, in the parish center and facilitate honest discussion. The book, by the same title, is also available.)

8. Catholic educational resources used in schools (especially elementary schools), parishes, and diocesan educational programs, should be reviewed for historical accuracy. Are the text books used in schools silent about the fact that presidents bishops, and religious orders “owned”\*\* enslaved human beings? Are texts and programs silent about the accomplishments of African Americans? The denial of history makes the establishment of peace and justice in our communities more difficult.

9. Attention should be given to ethnic and racial diversity in the religious art in our schools and churches. Are all sacred images Euro-centric? It is difficult for the Catholic Church to preach the dignity of all people before God while, indirectly through iconography, suggesting that the Kingdom of Heaven has no place for People of Color. The display of Juvenal Kaliki’s Tanzania crucifix during the Bishops’ meeting was noteworthy.

10. The Museum depicts a history during which African American people were generally treated as outsiders, as “minorities.” But by telling the full story, it affirms that People of Color, as American citizens, should not be treated as a “minority group” unless German Americans, Polish Americans, and Irish Americans are treated as “minority groups.” A true understanding of the story told in this Museum should help the Catholic Church make a conscious effort to correct the longstanding practice by the Church of selectively referring to some Americans (namely Hispanic People and Black People) as members of “minority groups.” No ethnic group constitutes the “majority” of the population. Every American is equally an American. Arbitrarily calling some Americans “minorities” is demeaning and inaccurate.

## IX. Conclusion

(32) The Museum's excellent restaurant, the Sweet Home Café, continues the history exposition with executive chef Jerome Grant's *tour de force* menu devoted to authentic African American cuisine. The wonderfully diverse menu is a delicious extension of the important artifacts and documents seen in the exhibit galleries. Many Museum visitors who saw things they had never seen before also tasted foods they had never eaten before. I enjoyed a plate of Georgia Shrimp & Anson Mills Stone Ground Grits, Smoked Tomato Butter, Caramelized Leeks, Crispy Tasso, and homemade cornbread. The walls of the Café display large black and white photographs of brave young African Americans "sitting-in" on stools in restaurants in the Deep South, stoically awaiting taunts and severe beatings at the hands of those who refused to serve People of Color. These nonviolent demonstrations, which I remember very well, sparked a true revolution in the manner of the non-violent revolution led by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and India.

(33) Looking around the restaurant, I noticed that almost all of the tables were racially "segregated." Black People were sitting together and White People were sitting together. I noticed the same thing in the groups walking through the Museum. I told myself that this was, hopefully, no more than a random happenstance and that I should not make too much of it.

(34) As I made my way out of the Museum of African American History and Culture, I turned over in my heart the words of the brilliant Harlem Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes, that adorn the wall of the Museum. These words are from a favorite poem of Dr. King who, in a more perfect world, would be enjoying his birthday dinner today with his children and his children's children.

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.  
Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.  
Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—  
I, too, am America.

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\* I avoid the use of the words **slave** or **slaves** in my writings. Instead, I speak of "enslaved human beings." The substantive "slaves" can be read to imply that there is a group of human beings in the world, namely slaves, who can be bought, sold and owned. Obviously, this is not true. As a Catholic priest and theologian, I hold firmly to the position that, from the perspective of sound philosophy, anthropology, and authentic Catholic theology, no one can "own" another human being in spite of the political, social and economic reality of human bondage. In my view, they were free human beings who, even when 'enslaved' by others, remained ontologically free. This is also true of victims of human trafficking in our own day. (The word "slave" is derived from "Slav." In the late Middle Ages,

Slavic people were forced into labor so often that they gave their name to human bondage. See also Old French *sclave*, from Medieval Latin *sclāvus*.)

\*\* I place the words “owned,” “bought,” “selling,” and “sold” in quotation marks to express my position that theologically and philosophically speaking no human being can buy, sell, or own another free human being. The standard usage implies a concession to the morally indefensible idea of one human being owning another. One cannot defend the statement, “I own my slaves” as the equivalent of “I own my dogs.” Sound philosophy teaches that free human beings own themselves. Authentic Christian theology teaches that we exist because Divine Being sustains us in being. One might say, we are owned by Divine Being, the source of human freedom.

\*\*\* **Negro** (derived from the Latin *niger* meaning dark or black) is a word first used by the Portuguese who were very active in the “selling”\*\* of free human beings from West Africa. Spanish and Portuguese began using this word (never used by Africans in the past or the present) in the mid-16th century. Its usage continued as a standard designation from the 17th to the 19th centuries. It was commonly used by prominent African American leaders, including W. E. B. DuBois (who fought tirelessly and unsuccessfully with newspapers for an upper case N in the same manner that many writers today fight, in vain, for an upper case B in Black), Booker T. Washington and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and African Americans in general into the 1960s. In the 1970s, it fell out of usage in part because of the general rejection of the pejorative rendering of the word. That pejorative is a word now shunned by polite society, banned from the pages of respected newspapers and journals, and unspoken by TV newscasters. Nevertheless, it is alive and well, a word used frequently in particular neighborhoods, communities, and households. It falls freely from the lips of certain “entertainers.” It is, by turns, considered a term of endearment, a crude slang expression, and the most heartbreaking of insults. It is a paradox that, in Barry Jenkins’ acclaimed film “Moonlight,” which many enthusiastic critics think should win the Academy Award, the poor, disadvantaged, bewildered young African American characters all constantly call each other and themselves by this very name.

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