

Learning to 'redeem the times' we live in

During the pandemic lockdown, a bishop spoke to his flock about fears and panic. He emphasized that times were bad, faith was going to be lost, God would leave us and all that remained was to hold tight to our traditions and hope for the best.

Seventeen centuries before, another bishop, watching history as he knew it come crashing down around him, spoke to his flock in this way: "Bad times! Troublesome times! People are saying this. Let our lives be good and the times will be good. We make our times; such as we are, such are the times" (St. Augustine, Sermon 30).

Augustine, who saw Rome ravaged and its empire collapse, challenged his people not to be defined by history but to re-imagine the history they were living. Like St. Paul before him, he urged Christians to "redeem the times" (Ephesians 5:16).

Which voice do we follow? How do we redeem our time, the time of virus, sickness, disarray, disharmony and confusion?

An example of redeeming the times that came to my heart began with the French-made, Cannes-awarded movie *Des hommes et des dieux* (*Of Gods and Men*). Since then, discovering the story on which the movie was based, reading further, discussing with others, talking with people who had visited the monastery the movie centred on, reflecting and praying with it all, I have learned much, but still I have much more to learn and ponder.

It's a rich, astounding story of people who acted in faith and love in face of violence. A small fraternity of men were true to themselves and their vision, to the point of being murdered rather than abandon the way of life they had committed to and the people they had committed to serving.

There are many levels to this story — inter-faith relations, monasticism, non-violent resistance, corrupt political alliances, radical hospitality, the meaning of a vow of stability. It's also a story of international relations in which French monks in an Algerian monastery kept faith, long past the point at which French-Algerian relations and intra-Algerian warfare rendered their presence tenuous and put their lives at risk.

Some decades earlier, the Algerian people had suffered through French occupation of their



Trappist monks are pictured in a scene from the 2011 film *Of Gods and Men*, which tells the story of the kidnapping and beheading of seven Trappist monks by a group of Islamic terrorists in 1996. (CNS photo/Sony Pictures Classics)



QUESTIONING FAITH
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country. The French withdrew but the two nations' stories could not help but be intertwined. Something had drawn these men from their native France, in a decision to stand with some of the poorest and least important citizens of Algeria.

Their self-gift could be said to be both traditional and novel. Something deep in the roots of Christianity led them to live in a way long-established and recognizable. And something creative led them to live in ways that shook boundaries.

If they couldn't completely fit in the system — monastic in France, political in Algeria — they could and did find a way to live their freedom in it. Though the price was first their liberty and eventually their lives, the record clearly shows that they accepted their bondage, and their deaths, in the freedom of love.

What difference did their self-gift make? At their funeral and burial, Algerian villagers and states-people mourned together with French clerics, hierarchs and dignitaries. The conflicts that led to the violent deaths of many, including these seven Trappist monks, were nowhere near settled. Yet the grief at their loss was felt on

all sides, and to this day touches us.

The monks of Tibhirine couldn't escape the violence of Algerian-French history. They could, and did, find — at great personal cost — a different way to be in that story. Notably, they did not do so alone, but in communion with their community, other religious and the local Church and bishop.

Their story witnesses the pattern in the healing of trauma, whether personal or collective. There is a way of transformation. It's not easy, it's not quick-fix and it's not virtual. It is real. It is a glimpse of the pattern God has revealed to us in Christ.

Learning this story, it's hard to escape the question their lives ask of us: do the violent, self-interested and power-hungry feel threatened by our way of living our Christian faith? Do the poor, those hungering for peace and the vulnerable feel enriched by it?

May I replace, in C.S. Lewis' 1948 reflection, his words "atomic bomb" with "virus": "If we are all going to be destroyed by a *virus*, let that *virus* when it comes find us doing sensible and human things — praying, working, teaching, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our friends over a pint and a game of darts — not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about *viruses*."

When the virus of human violence struck, the monks were living normalcy — the doctor among them was seeing dozens of patients daily, the cook was driving dangerous roads into town for groceries, they were keeping the liturgical hours and having regular community meetings.

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Finding hope in the Eucharist

Over a couple of weeks, the Archdiocese of Toronto celebrated two joyful significant events: the opening of our churches on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi on June 14 and the ordination of eight transitional deacons into the priesthood on June 27.

Both events are a reflection of who we are as people of God. The names of our newly ordained priests and their countries of birth reflect the diversity of the archdiocese. It was much the same for my ordination class in 2004 when for the first time in the archdiocese's history none of the six newly-ordained priests had been born in Canada.

Priests in the archdiocese come from different backgrounds, yet they are identified by their ministry — the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

The opening of the churches on Corpus Christi Sunday offered us the opportunity to come back to adore our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament for the first time in three months. Many Catholics are delighted they can come to Mass again to receive the Eucharist, the "bread of life" that unites us to Christ (John 6:57). Our understanding of the Eucharist inspires us, as God's people, to embrace diversity and to accept and respect each other as we are.

However, recent social developments have awakened us to reconsider how we see the world in general and the Eucharist in particular. Over the past few weeks we have read many stories about systemic anti-Black racism in our world, as well as the life experiences of Black people, Indigenous people and people of ethnic minorities in this country and around the world.

These stories have indicated that racism is not only confined to the police and the justice system, it occurs in all aspects of life — in ways we might not have thought. Black people have related stories in which they were belittled and ignored. And many people worldwide have spoken out against anti-Black racism and the need to address all kinds of racism.

So, what is anti-Black racism? How do we recognize anti-Black racism? How do we know when we are acting on racist beliefs against others? Racism is difficult to talk about — it has become a hot-button topic. We don't like to admit that we have racist biases. We might not even accept that anti-Black racism exists. The mere



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mention of the word "racism" can elicit all sorts of different emotions.

One evening as I was reflecting on the day's events in the church, I recalled a question that had been asked by a few people since my ordination — what is it like for me to be a Black person serving as a priest in Toronto? I had wondered what prompted these individuals to ask me that question.

Whatever the reasons, the Church is known to be the voice of the voiceless and it is expected to be a leader in speaking out against anti-Black racism. And it starts from us who form the Body of Christ.

So how do we start fighting for justice for all people? In a recent column by Cathy Majtenyi in *The Register*, she writes that battling racism starts with admitting that "racism exists in our lives and in our society."

We all need to reflect on our own biases and to ask ourselves when we have been blind to our own racist biases. As people of the Eucharist, at Mass, we are all gathered from different backgrounds, including the celebrants. But "we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17), symbolizing our unity in Christ as one community. As one community, together, united in God, we must listen to our brothers and sisters crying out against injustice.

As people of God, we need to recognize our differences — and to pray that God may open our hearts to the needs of people who are different from us. In addressing the issue of systemic racism, Archbishop Murray Chatlain of Keewatin-Le Pas recently was quoted in *The Register*: "It's not a task the Church can observe from the sidelines."

When we start to admit that we are different, then we may find Cardinal Thomas Collins' message for victims of racism as a message of hope and reconciliation "as we strive to reflect on the loving face of Jesus to all."

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