

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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FERGUSON

I live 30 miles from Ferguson, MO. The mighty Mississippi, and multiple differences, separate us but, from a national perspective, we are part of the epicenter of this racial/cultural/educational/poverty/justice/religious/spiritual earthquake. (It is too big and complex for one adjective.) Family and friends who know our geography but who don't live here sometimes assume that we have some special insight into the conflict because we are where we are.

I wish that assumption were true but, honestly, I don't know any more than most of you about the nature or history of the issues continuing to emerge from our neighbors in Ferguson. Besides, there are so many articles (and the deluge of books is surely on the way) about the city I drive by when I go to Lambert Airport that I'm not sure I can add anything significant.

So, if you already read this or thought of it, you can skip the rest of this chat. Here's my main observation: there is a striking and profound difference between how the Catholic church responded to and got involved with the civil rights initiatives of the 1960's and '70's and how the Catholic church is responding to similar conflicts in Ferguson and elsewhere today.

I am old enough not only to remember those earlier battles but to have participated in some of them personally. The contrast between then and now, from the Catholic church perspective, is dramatic.

Back then, many priests in collars and nuns in habits marched with the protesters, went to jail, got shot at or even killed, preached, led, organized and were vilified, threatened, rejected, and/or cheered, embraced, and honored. Even some bishops joined in or, at least, publicly supported the demonstrators. Of course, Catholic lay people were also part of the struggle. There were other Catholics, clergy and laity, who opposed this participation which led to a divided membership. Society was split and the church was split. But the church was deeply involved, along with other faith-based groups and leaders, struggling with the real issues that faced people as together we tried to find a path toward justice, reconciliation and community.

Historians have to determine how successful we were. But I, for one, am still proud that we tried, that we were participants rather than spectators, and that we walked with the

marginalized, outcast, the poor, the scapegoats of an unbalanced system, and the undeserving victims of profound prejudice and devastating discrimination. It felt like we were doing the mission of Jesus.

That was then. Now it feels like we have abandoned that mission in favor of protesting abortion and condemning gays. The Roman collars and religious habits were noticeably missing in Ferguson (although I know one priest personally who was there) and the official Catholic involvement was limited to some brief, bland statements about maintaining the peace. Many people quickly took sides, either for the protesters or for the police, and the major arguments for each side seemed based more on social, political, and economic criteria than on spiritual, religious and moral principles. It is a distant echo from the impassioned commitment and deeply personal Church involvement evident in the 1960's and 70's.

How did now lose them? The answer is obvious: the leadership changed. Of course, after 50 years, the names of leaders are different but most significantly, the type of Catholic church leaders, the bishops and most of the younger priests, devolved into sanctuary-hugging, doctrine-spouting, fear-centered clerics worthy of the Pharisees. Most of them wouldn't dare mingle with protesters or publicly align themselves with courageous, non-violent actions in response to injustice. It isn't that they took sides against the demonstrators. It's that they didn't take sides for the gospel.

The temptation is to reduce Ferguson to Michael Brown vs. Officer Darren Wilson. Avoid that temptation because the reality is as complex as all those previously-mentioned adjectives imply. For decades, we as a Church have lost our focus on systemic injustice, on the predictable human devastation inherent in generations of dependent living, on the toxic residue of slavery, on the necessary and ingrained human longing for responsible law and order, and on the tangible possibility of creating a gospel-based, loving community with equal parts of justice, respect, forgiveness and understanding regardless of race, economic status, social standing or religious preference. The Church also lost many of the 20- to 30-year-olds who bring their passion, commitment, and talent to civil rights issues.

Ferguson reminds us of what we forgot. This time, let's not forget.