

Where Do We Go From Here: Structures of Sin and the Unfinished Work

MLK Remembrance Luncheon Speech

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Good afternoon.

On August 16, 1967—less than eight months before his assassination—Dr. King stood before the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and asked the question that remains ours to answer: *Where do we go from here?*

This was not the triumphant King of the March on Washington. This was a King who had watched the movement fracture, who had been met with fire hoses in Birmingham and burning crosses in Chicago, who understood that the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act—monumental as they were—had addressed only the most visible symptoms of a deeper disease. He told that assembly: 'In spite of a decade of significant progress, the problem is far from solved. The deep rumbling of discontent in our cities is indicative of the fact that the plant of freedom has grown only a bud and not yet a flower.'

What King diagnosed that day, our Catholic tradition names with unflinching clarity. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1869, teaches that 'sins give rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness. Structures of sin are the expression and effect of personal sins. They lead their victims to do evil in their turn.'

King understood this. He traced the connections with prophetic precision: 'A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will thingify them and make them things. And therefore, they will exploit them and poor people generally economically. And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.'

This is the logic of structural sin—how personal sins accumulate, calcify into customs, codify into laws, and construct the very architecture of society until injustice seems as natural as

gravity. The Catechism warns us in paragraph 1868 that we bear responsibility for the sins of others not only when we participate directly, but 'by not disclosing or not hindering them when we have an obligation to do so.'

King called this collision of forces 'immoral power with powerless morality'—and named it 'the major crisis of our times.' Nearly sixty years later, that crisis has not resolved. It has evolved.

But King did not leave his audience—or us—in despair. He offered a theological imperative drawn from the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. He said: 'Jesus looked at him and said, Nicodemus, you must be born again. In other words, your whole structure must be changed.' And then King made the application unmistakable: 'What I'm saying today is that we must go from this convention and say, America, you must be born again!'

This is not merely political rhetoric. This is the language of *metanoia*—the conversion of heart and structure that Catholic Social Teaching demands. We cannot simply tinker at the margins. We cannot content ourselves with what King called 'improving the food in the prison while the people remain securely incarcerated behind bars.'

The work of dismantling structures of sin is the work of the Gospel. It requires what King called 'a strong, demanding love'—not sentimental affection, but love that implements the demands of justice. As he put it: 'Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.'

King closed that speech with a litany that should convict us still:

'Let us be dissatisfied until America will no longer have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.'

'Let us be dissatisfied until the tragic walls that separate the outer city of wealth and comfort from the inner city of poverty and despair shall be crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.'

'Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout White Power! but everybody will talk about God's power and human power.'

Brothers and sisters, we gather today not merely to remember Dr. King, but to take up the work he left unfinished. The structures of sin he named have not crumbled; they have adapted. Our task—the task of people who claim to follow a God who hears the cry of the oppressed—is to name those structures, to refuse complicity in them, and to labor for the conversion of our institutions as surely as we labor for the conversion of our hearts.

The arc of the moral universe is long. But as King reminded us, it bends toward justice—not on its own, but because people of faith and courage bend it.

Where do we go from here?

We go forward. Together. Dissatisfied. Until the work is done.

Thank you.