

Celebrating African American History Month

An Interview with
Donna Toliver Grimes

Donna Toliver Grimes is the Assistant Director for African American Affairs in the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Previously, she was the Poverty, Education, and Outreach Manager in the USCCB Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development.

Ms. Grimes is a member of the Catholic delegation of Christian Churches Together USA and is on the Executive Board of Sisters in the Spirit of the Archdiocese of Washington.



Donna is a volunteer listener-supporter at a local public radio station. She is a longtime active member of St. Teresa of Avila parish in Washington, DC.

How does Catholic social teaching address racism and how do faith communities apply this teaching to promote universal equality?

Donna Toliver Grimes: The bottom line: “Racism is a sin,” said the U.S. Catholic bishops in their 1979 pastoral statement, *“Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day.”* CST is founded on and emerges from respect for the life and dignity of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God to fulfill the divine purpose. An earlier statement entitled, *“On Racial Harmony,”* issued by the bishops in 1963 affirmed in similar statements decades before, stood against segregation, and advocated for respectful treatment and peaceful relations through civil dialog and prayer. More recently, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued, *“The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society.”* This was the contribution of the Holy See to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance (2001). There is good teaching on the subject, although the final word is yet to be expressed.

Nevertheless, it is also important to recognize that Church practice has been firmly planted on both sides of the issue concurrently. The Church implemented, benefitted from, and was a major player in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. She subsequently defended and promoted racial segregation and largely remained silent about acts of terrorism launched and widespread violation of the life and dignity of African Americans. At the same time, the Catholic Church has a long and noble tradition of reaching out to extend God’s love and mercy to those in need at home and abroad.

Faith communities must enliven the social teachings of the Church with holy boldness and consistency. (#All lives matter.)

What is the distinction between individual and institutional racism?

Donna Toliver Grimes: Theologically, this question provides a concrete illustration of the distinction between personal and social sin. Personal sin not only impacts the individual, but also the community. Social sin may be understood as an accumulation of personal sins which have both individual and social ramifications. Similarly, race prejudice and racism reflect personal and social sin, respectively. Yet, if we are ever going to rid our world of racism, we need to use the language more precisely. For example, we hide our discomfort with the subject by speaking of prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, the tendency to label individuals as racists is paralyzing and does nothing to eradicate the stain.

Within a given culture,
persons may speak
of discrimination,
but that’s as far
they are willing to go.
Within the prevailing
culture, many do not
perceive that racism
applies to them – if they
recognize it at all.
In yet another culture,
persons are tormented
by “knowing too much”
about racism...
Like it or not,
we are one human family.

Racism is entrenched race prejudice fueled by the power of structural or systemic injustice. Refusing to understand this distinction is a real problem in our society because a personalized framing of the issue minimizes and displaces the source of the problem and thus, simplifies and obscures the solution.

The real dichotomy that we've fallen into as a society is the habit of harping on the hurtful words or actions of individuals while ignoring widespread generational effects of injustice in public policy, harmful practices, and unfair treatment hitting people from every direction of resource distribution.

How does culture influence racism?

Donna Toliver Grimes: Historically, racism has been framed as a Black and White issue in this country. While in practice and through prevailing power structures, racism is invigorated by a mindset of white supremacy, all are affected by racism. We are like fish in water, generally swimming with the currents, largely unaware and at times disoriented upon perceiving our fellow swimmers.

Something I've learned from working with a diverse staff and conducting cultural diversity training is that racism is not a tangible reality in some cultures. Within a given culture, persons may speak of discrimination, but that's as far they are willing to go. Within the prevailing culture, many do not perceive that racism applies to them – if they recognize it at all. In yet another culture, persons are tormented by “knowing too much” about racism. We seem to exist on different planets, even in different universes.



Among those who navigate the world where racism rears its ugly head often and unexpectedly, there also may be a phenomenon of internalized racism. Sadly and subconsciously, they turn racism on themselves and members of their own group, denigrating physical features, social order, and other characteristics.

One other dynamic that should not be overlooked regarding culture is the global and subliminal transmission of racism through American culture by way of advertising, entertainment, and media. For instance, American culture channels standards of beauty and the branding of demographic groups. The negative effects can influence perspectives from self-esteem to terrorism.

How does racism connect to poverty, hunger and global injustice?

Donna Toliver Grimes: There's a lot of solid analysis on this. An excellent starting point is Catholic Charities' issue paper, *Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good* (2007). These are complex, interrelated issues and like other justice issues they affect us here and around the world. Our faith, supported by modern science, teaches that there is really just one race. Like it or not, we are one human family.

For solutions we can look to Catholic social teaching for the thread of human life and dignity that weaves together all peace and justice concerns. Strong faith-based organizations that are doing a tremendous job of clarifying these connections for non-experts and people of good will and engaging them in promoting justice are the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Relief Services, Bread for the World, Sojourners, and JustFaith Ministries, to name a few.

How would you explain racism to a child?

Donna Toliver Grimes: Recent public discourse has exposed the family secret: Black families talk about racism. This survival technique, though necessary, has not always been effective. The conversation about how to respond to the police does not necessarily foster racial reconciliation, but it is a potential door-opener to lead us down that path. I wonder what discussions on race White parents and others have with their young, and to what end?

My elders were reluctant to discuss racism. They sheltered us from the humiliation of racial segregation and discrimination. As situations arose, we asked questions. "Why can't we go to Glen Echo amusement park?" The answer, "Because I said so," goes a long way with an eight year old.

Yet, the subject wasn't off limits for our three children. My husband, their father, and I were in full agreement about raising them to have a healthy sense of self and community. We never lied to them about Santa Claus either.

It's really all about love. So, we didn't start with racism. Rather, we started with our history and culture. We surrounded them with images, books, art, activities, and a faith community that reinforced this value. Our family celebrated Kwanzaa together, with friends and in the community. Now the young people lead these celebrations.

I believe the conversation about racism was introduced with the gift of White dolls that relatives gave my daughter and which I exchanged for Black dolls. We repeated this with the action figures my son received. By the second son, the relatives understood and supported our wishes. One time a Hispanic mother overheard the conversation with my daughter in the store while I was making the exchange. She chimed in stating that she'd taken a similar action with her daughter, exchanging a blond Barbie for a brunette. Also, I explained to my daughter that I wasn't saying she could never have a White doll. We fully supported a doll collection that looked like the United Nations, but her first dolls needed to look like her. Today, she understands and appreciates the lesson.

Has the Catholic Church been outspoken enough on issues of racism?

Donna Toliver Grimes: For years, the Vatican, bishops, theologians, and other Church leaders have issued beautiful statements in favor of racial justice although just actions are more meaningful and memorable. Fifty years ago the Catholic Church spoke loudly by its witness at the front lines of major civil rights activities. Beyond the public witness are countless stories of the private witness of priests, religious sisters, interracial councils, students, and others who swam against the prevailing current of racism. The Bureau of Black and Indian Missions, and later the creation of diocesan offices and commissions, provided pastoral care and/or promoted racial harmony. Forty years ago, the Catholic bishops took a gigantic step forward by creating the Catholic Campaign for Human Development to address racial and economic justice. Fr. Bryan Massingale's book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (2010) is a valuable and insightful resource for understanding this is complex relationship.



In the past 20 years, it seems that someone has turned down the volume on this prophetic voice. Many offices of Black Catholic Ministry have been dismantled or defunded. In the face of eroding voting rights, the recent murders of unarmed African American men, women, and children, a police training program that uses mug shots of African American men for target practice, and similar stories, the corporate Church seems to have changed the channel. Resources are pouring into Hispanic Ministry and drying up elsewhere. The present focus on immigration tends to omit an elephant in the room, the racial justice component.

Some areas of the Church (e.g., certain dioceses, organizations, religious orders) are developing intercultural competence, that is, the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to relate across cultures. As the country and the Church are trending toward greater diversity, I believe the Church should do more to foster collaboration among diverse groups throughout the country.

What two events are causes for hope regarding race relations in the U.S.?

Donna Toliver Grimes: The election of President Barack Obama twice gives me tremendous hope. Although the euphoria faded long ago, and I strongly disagree with his position on some major issues, the pride remains. I never thought I would see an African American president in my lifetime. While he is not above criticism, particularly for not closing Guantanamo, drone strikes, and other military policies, the disrespect and personal attacks on this President and the first family are frequent reminders that racism persists.

Another hopeful sign is the multicultural activism of young people. I am encouraged by the Occupy, Dreamers, and Ferguson/#BlackLivesMatter movements. I applaud their involvement in mission and service trips. The grass-roots empowerment organizations that they utilize encourage and inspire me. I'm taking a few actions of my own, but I'm very hopeful as I watch them go for it!

Can you provide two examples where forgiveness was asked for past racial injustices against African Americans?

Donna Toliver Grimes: Public apologies are good symbolically, but have little cleansing power. Throughout U.S. history, remedies for injustices against African Americans have been short-lived, lasting about a decade (e.g., Reconstruction and Affirmative Action), while Reparations are completely off the table. However, just as various Truth and Reconciliation processes in several African nations generated some healing, an effective apology would include consideration of reparations. Read *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (2005), by Joy DuGruy, and Ta-Nehesi Coates' article, "The Case for Reparations" in the June 2014 issue of *The Atlantic*.



How can we effectively confront racism today?

Donna Toliver Grimes: There is no quick fix. We've got to do the hard work of building adult friendships across racial and cultural lines. This means extending ourselves in public settings, in organizations to which we belong, in parent groups, at church, on the job, and enabling friendships to grow. Another thing is that we need to create safe spaces for dialog on racial justice and equality.

In our cultural diversity training one of the ways that we encourage developing intercultural competency is by breaking the "don't talk" rule concerning race and racism. I've found that in a trusting environment, transformative education eventually reaps successful outcomes: changes of heart, greater compassion, experiencing more intimacy with God.

Also, I believe we should question status quo demographic approaches to the collection and use of data. Given the paradigm of African Americans being at the top of bad statistics and at the bottom of good ones, I've been questioning the usefulness of customary approaches to data collection and analysis: Must we always gather statistics about race? How productive is it to relate negative findings about poverty, crime, lack of resources, etc., by racial breakdown? When designing forms, surveys, and questionnaires consider how the data will be used. Reflect on whether there are more helpful ways than racial breakdowns to understand the challenges we face.

How would you suggest commemorating African American History month?

Donna Toliver Grimes: One thing I suggest to everyone is, take time to read a book about the life of an African American in any field of personal interest – sports, science, business, entertainment, or the arts. Another suggestion is to attend Sunday Mass (or other religious service) at an African American house of worship in your area. Of course, February is a great time to catch a film, exhibit, or special on PBS. It's also a wonderful opportunity to do your own homework. For example, expand understanding about white privilege or micro-aggression, learn about the pathways to U.S. citizenship for different ethnic groups in the country or work on cultivating those new friendships. Lastly, as this is the 50th anniversary of several civil rights milestones, I invite you to visit our Rebuilding the Bridge webpage where we are exploring the role of the Catholic Church in the civil rights movement then and now. Here is the link: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/african-american-affairs-50th-anniversary-initiative.cfm>.

Who is the Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr. of today?

Donna Toliver Grimes: History will reveal stellar leaders in the fullness of time. Today's real (s)heroes are countless unnamed grass-roots activists who are struggling to achieve justice wherever it is threatened or lacking.

Name three public leaders today are acting to rid our nation of racism.

Donna Toliver Grimes: I greatly admire the work of Bryan Stephenson, Michelle Alexander, and Medea Benjamin. Bryan, the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, is achieving victories in juvenile justice reform and is advancing other racial justice education and advocacy projects. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness* (2012), is no longer a naïve civil rights attorney. She caught the attention and heart of the public needed to turn around the slave ship holding over 2 million of America's forgotten, expendable underclass. Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, shines the spotlight on U.S. military policies that are killing untold numbers of innocent men, women, and children in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Her book, *Drone Warfare* (2012) is an important wake-up call for people of faith and conscience.

These inspirational leaders champion the liberation of the most marginalized and vulnerable people, bringing them to our consciousness. In essence, these leaders are saying, "Look! These, too, are our brothers

**Fifty years ago,
the people
gathered strength
in great numbers
and many colors.
They leaned heavily
on their faith.
It's the same
for us today.
Eradicating racism
and injustice requires
us to pull together
(Harambee!) and tap into
the reservoir of faith.**



What gives you strength to love without bitterness?

Donna Toliver Grimes: This is the 50th anniversary of the modern civil rights movement. We've observed jubilee anniversaries of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, Mississippi Freedom Summer, passage of the Civil Rights Act and, in 2015, we will honor the Voting Rights Act. For more than a year, I've been working on a project to highlight this moment: look at it with fresh eyes. Through the project we are drawing lines to tie in current issues of immigration, police conduct, poverty, the environment, war, economic justice, and other concerns that are compromising the quality of human life on the planet. One common denominator is faith. Fifty years ago, the people gathered strength in great numbers and many colors. They leaned heavily on their faith. It's the same for us today. Eradicating racism and injustice requires us to pull together (Haram-bee!) and tap into the reservoir of faith.

As a young girl, my maternal grandfather was my hero. He remains my inspiration. Such a kind, humble, and loving person, Grandpop kept a small statue of St. Martin de Porres on his dresser. That was the only Black religious image in my life as a child.

I grew up during the civil rights movement. Consequently, my understanding of racism awakened together with a maturing faith. I questioned why we were all Catholics rather than Baptists or Methodists and wondered what we were missing of music, preaching, and Scripture knowledge. Somehow, my grandfather's faith was amazing even in the absence of these elements. It always impressed me that Grandpop didn't resent people who were unkind and those who hated us. When I asked his reason for not telling us children about segregation and discrimination, he responded that we "didn't need to know about those things."

Thus, my Catholic faith is an integral part of my identity. Also, I am a woman of African, Native American, and other unknown heritage. Mostly though, I am a child of God who is full of mercy and compassion; and I strive daily to grow into the daughter that my Heavenly Baba created me to be.

***"Racism is a sin:
a sin that divides the human family,
blots out the image of God
among specific members of that family,
and violates the fundamental
human dignity of those called
to be children of the same Father.
Racism is the sin that says some
human beings are inherently superior
and others essentially inferior
because of races. It is the sin that makes
racial characteristics the determining
factor for the exercise of human rights.***

It mocks the words of Jesus:

***"Treat others the way
you would have them treat you."
Indeed, racism is more than a disregard
for the words of Jesus; it is a denial
of the truth of the dignity
of each human being revealed
by the mystery of the Incarnation."***

***~ "Brothers and Sisters to Us:
U.S. Catholic Bishops Letter
on Racism in Our Day.***