DISCUSSION GUIDE

Slavery, The Catholic Church, and Lessons for Today



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Presenter: Christopher Kellerman, S.J.
Streaming Availability:
http://igsol.net/efj2

DESCRIPTION

"Slavery, the Catholic Church, and Lessons for Today," is the name of a presentation given by Fr. Chris Kellerman, S.J., and hosted by the Ignatian Solidarity Network. In this presentation, Fr. Chris Kellerman, S.J., will explain the basics of the Catholic Church's historical involvement with slaveholding and the Atlantic slave trade, drawing lessons from this history for the Church's contemporary efforts for racial justice. Use these discussion questions to debrief the video.

THEMES OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT IN THE WEBINAR

- Dignity of the Human Person
- Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
- Solidarity

You can access the recording here: http://igsol.net/efj2

SYNOPSIS

Fr. Kellerman opens the talk with the questions and assumptions he wanted to tackle in his book: slavery was common practice; nobody was really against it; and is the Church really responsible? Kellerman states that these assumptions appear regularly in discourse around the Church and slavery, but need clarification and rebuttal.

The ancient world shaped the Church's understanding of slavery. Aristotle believed that some people were born to be enslaved, that it is in their nature. The Romans believed that any non-citizen could be justly enslaved via war or trading. The Catholic Church largely appropriated these rules through the mid-19th century.

While slavery existed throughout the years of the early Church, it began taking on racial characteristics in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1452, Pope Nicholas V issued the papal bull Dum Diversas, granting Portugal the right to enslave non-Christians. This allowance of enslaving non-Christians reflected anti-Muslim sentiment lingering from the Crusades and the existent Mediterranean slave trade.

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In the subsequent centuries, the Catholic Church began embracing a broader theology of slavery. While some theologians rooted their beliefs in Aristotelian and Roman thought, others developed a racialized theology. Jesuits were particularly involved in the expansion of racialized slavery. They wrote the necessary theology and actively participated in enslaving, buying, selling, and holding enslaved persons.

It would be incorrect, however, to state that Catholics universally accepted slavery. Individuals such as St. Gregory of Nyssa, who is considered a leading father in the Church, and Bartolome de las Casas, who owned land and enslaved people, came to speak up against slavery. Black Catholic confraternities and enslaved Black Catholics condemned slavery. Nevertheless, the Catholic hierarchy widely accepted slavery until its official condemnation by Pope Leo XIII in the late 19th century.

The last portion of the webinar included a Q&A, which turned to the topic of reparations. Kellerman makes two keen observations. First, he states that preferential option for the poor means listening attentively to stories and history. The Church committed grave sins by not listening to enslaved persons and their descendants. Second, Kellerman states that the theologians who supported slavery also supported reparations for those who were unjustly enslaved. As Pope Leo XIII and his successors stated: all enslavement is unjust. Therefore all enslaved persons and their families are owed reparations.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How did the theology of slavery change over the years? How is this related to changes in the actions, behaviors, and laws of enslavement and slaveholding?
2. How do we reckon with the clear errors of past Church teaching? How do we seek justice to repair those sins?
3. How can listening help overcome racial injustice today? What are models or methods of listening that might be useful?
4. Kellerman mentions several exemplars of justice. Who are some of these prophets? What attitudes can we model?
5. Kellerman makes a case for reparations at the end of his talk. What do you think reparations should look like today? How do preferential option for the poor and solidarity affect the case for reparations?

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