

The Unspoken Privilege of Being White

by Father Richard Rohr, OFM

For a long time, I naively hoped that racism was a thing of the past. Those of us who are white have a very hard time seeing that we constantly receive special treatment [because of social systems built to prioritize people with white skin]. This systemic “white privilege” makes it harder for us to recognize the experiences of people of color as valid and real when they speak of racial profiling, police brutality, discrimination in the workplace, continued segregation in schools, lack of access to housing, and on and on. This is not the experience of most white people, so how can it be true? *Now, we are being shown how limited our vision is.*

Because we have never been on the other side, we largely do not recognize the structural access we enjoy, the trust we think we deserve, the assumption that we always belong and do not have to earn our belonging. All this we take for granted as normal. Only the outsider can spot these attitudes in us.

Of course, we all belong. There is no issue of more or less in the eyes of an Infinite God. Yet the ego believes the lie that there isn’t enough to go around and that for me to succeed or win, someone else must lose. And so we’ve greedily supported systems and governments that work to our own advantage at the expense of others, most often people of color or any highly visible difference. The advancement of the white person was too often at the cost of other people not advancing at all. A minor history course should make that rather clear.

I would have never seen my own white privilege if I had not been forced outside of my dominant white culture by travel, by working in the jail, by hearing stories from counselees and, frankly, by making a complete fool of myself in so many social settings—most of which I had the freedom to avoid!

Power [and privilege] never surrenders without a fight. If your entire life has been to live unquestioned in your position of power—a power that was culturally given to you, but you think you earned—there is almost no way you will give it up without major failure, suffering, humiliation, or defeat. As long as we really want to be on top and would take advantage of any privilege or short cut to get us there, we will never experience true “liberty, equality, fraternity” (revolutionary ideals that endure as mottos for France and Haiti).

If God operates as me, God operates as “thee” too, and the playing field is utterly leveled forever. Like Jesus, St. Francis, St. Clare, and many other humble mystics, we then have to rush down instead of up. In the act of letting go and choosing to become servants, community can at

last be possible. The illusory state of privilege just gets in the way of neighboring and basic human friendship.