

## Article

# On Being a Listening Church: The U.S. Catholic Church and Black Lives Matter

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**Abstract:** The article explores the intersection of Black Lives Matter and the synodal process within the U.S. Catholic Church, focusing on the church's stance on racism and racial justice. Drawing upon Pope Francis' call for the church to become a listening church, I argue that the church currently lacks crucial elements of inclusivity, engagement with the lived experiences of the faithful, and a willingness to address conflict in the context of racial justice. I propose a closer examination of Black Lives Matter and the synodal process as a means for the church to adapt and become a genuinely attentive church, improving discussions on race relations in the United States.

**Keywords:** synodality; racism; racial justice; Black Lives Matter; Open Wide Our Hearts; whiteness

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, contemporary social movements have emerged as powerful catalysts for change, challenging societal structures, and advocating for justice. Among these movements, "Black Lives Matter" stands at the forefront, demanding an end to systemic racism and violence against Black communities.

The Black Lives Matter movement emerged in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, in relation to the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American. Initially characterized as a form of online or hashtag activism, the movement quickly garnered traction in 2014 due to the emerging protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the death of Michael Brown at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson. The Black Lives Matter movement has become a global civil rights movement that advocates for and raises awareness about the disproportionate violence and discrimination endured by Black communities.

One cannot deny that there are profound differences between the Black Lives Matter movement and the Catholic Church. For example, most leaders in the movement reject the church's teachings on sexuality, marriage, and the nuclear family. Others reject their collaborative efforts because they think the church has not done enough to fight racism. On a final note, the movement does not consider itself a religious but a social movement whose membership is both intercultural and interfaith. While these differences might suggest that the church and the movement are incongruent, there is still room for meaningful conversations with, and for learning from, each other.

In response to the ongoing violence against marginalized people in the United States, the U.S. Catholic Church has released its most recent pastoral letter against racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts". Despite many laudable moments expressed in the pastoral letter, the letter has not questioned bishops' complicity in perpetuating racial disparities. Moreover, some clerical and episcopal statements have expressed distrust and suspicion toward social movements, dismissing them as "pseudo-religions" or labeling them atheistic (Gomez 2021). These dismissive attitudes undermine the commitment and dedication of millions of young people who passionately advocate for their human dignity.

Given Pope Francis' call to become a listening church, it seems appropriate to reflect on the church's stance on racism and racial justice from a synodal perspective. The racial



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disparities and the contentious reactions to Black Lives Matter make me wonder what a church genuinely attentive to racial injustices might look like. Therefore, I propose closely examining the intersection of Black Lives Matter and the synodal process within the U.S. Catholic Church. More specifically, I argue that, in the context of racial justice, the hierarchical church currently lacks crucial elements of being a listening church: inclusivity, engagement with the lived experiences of the faithful, and a willingness to address conflict. In addition, I suggest that Black Lives Matter serves as an example of how the church can adapt to become a truly listening church, making strides in improving discussions on race relations in the United States.

I begin by analyzing Pope Francis' vision of becoming a listening church, focusing on the three aforementioned areas that characterize a listening church. Afterward, I examine the most recent pastoral letter on racial justice, "Open Wide Our Hearts", outlining the positive aspects while recognizing areas in which the U.S. bishops must improve their discerning practices, especially in addressing the issue of whiteness in society and within its ranks. Lastly, I outline how Black Lives Matter serves as an example of how one can discern the church's stance on systemic racism in a synodal manner.

## 2. Becoming a "Listening" Church

When Pope Francis introduced the synodal path in 2020, it was widely acknowledged that the church had a tremendous opportunity to authentically transform into a church that actively listens and genuinely cares for marginalized individuals that ought to encompass the entire People of God, united in communion, embarking on a journey together as a pilgrim church while actively engaging in their evangelizing mission. The church perceives itself as "a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" ([Second Vatican Council 1964](#), para. 1), which it lives out through the recognition and emphasis on the laypeople's invaluable contributions to the church's priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission. Just as each member brings a unique perspective to the synodal path, they also express the spirit of synodality through interactions with one another. By embarking on a path of discernment, we can effectively realize our vision of a genuinely synodal church.

Such synodal understanding allows us to address both societal and ecclesial areas of concern. Synodality places great importance on the praxis of "listening" to tackle these concerns effectively. The term listening was not chosen arbitrarily, as there is a distinction between a "hearing" and a "listening" church. While hearing conveys a limited dimension of displaying a general receptiveness to dialogue, "listening" transcends this sphere. A listening church moves beyond mere hearing and engages in genuine conversation, wherein all participants are considered equals. According to theologian Christoph Pierre, "Synodal listening is an affirmation of each person's dignity and is an expression of respect for the voices, legitimate desires, problems and sufferings of the People of God" ([Pierre 2021](#), p. 7). Consequently, a synodal church reaffirms the dignity and value of every individual.

In order to genuinely embody a church that journeys together, it is important for the entire body of the church, encompassing both the clergy and laypeople, to cultivate a disposition and attentiveness towards one another's worries and concerns. The community can derive insights from these narratives and collectively forge a path forward through attentive listening. To do so, I propose that the praxis of listening encompasses three interconnected dimensions: Firstly, it necessitates an openness toward the other, grounded in the principle of inclusion. Secondly, it calls for an openness toward truth, which includes paying attention to the lived experiences within the church. Lastly, it includes exposure to conflict, recognizing it as a constructive and inspirational discernment process.

Pope Francis describes in "Fratelli Tutti" that openness towards the other is a key aspect of the listening process. He asserts that "the ability to sit down and listen to others, typical of interpersonal encounters, is paradigmatic of the welcoming attitude shown by those who transcend narcissism, and accept others, caring for them and welcoming them into their lives" ([Francis 2020](#), para. 48). In this regard, the Pope draws upon the Gospel,

emphasizing the importance of demonstrating tender love and care. Just as Jesus has welcomed us into His house, so are we called upon to cultivate a similar disposition that opens our hearts and embraces all members of the Church, appreciating their manifold richness and diversity, as well as their unique charisms and talents. By harnessing these talents, we can envisage a church grounded in a grassroots perspective that emerges “from below”.

The synod’s working document has already outlined the need for a church that focuses on inclusivity:

The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process: “Instead of behaving like gatekeepers trying to exclude others from the table, we need to do more to make sure that people know that everyone can find a place and a home here. (General Secretariat of the Synod 2022, para. 31)

The principle of radical inclusion demands that each individual inherently deserves a place at the metaphorical table without any reservations or exceptions. In a synodal church, this principle is upheld by providing a platform for individuals to voice their perspectives, address areas of concern, and offer their expertise in areas they see fit.

The second dimension of listening implies a general openness toward truth. In the context of synodality, we do not solely confine truth to doctrinal propositions; instead, we find truth embedded within lived narratives. As Pope Francis states, “Together, we can seek the truth in dialogue, in relaxed conversation or in passionate debate. To do so calls for perseverance; it entails moments of silence and suffering, yet it can patiently embrace the broader experience of individuals and peoples” (Francis 2020, para. 50). Engaging in truthful discourse and attentively heeding the lived experiences of those on the margins compels us to acknowledge the presence of distortions within our midst. These distortions are of such magnitude that they detrimentally impact the unity among church members. Expanding our horizons and granting a platform for these marginalized voices to be heard facilitates introspection and enables us to discern the factors that have led to these discrepancies. Focusing on the lived experiences of the church allows us to envision a church that aptly represents the diverse array of its members while concurrently fostering unity among the People of God, journeying together along the same path.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis has already articulated a vision that embraces the potential for promoting such ecclesial strategies through the framework of the church as an inverted pyramid. This vision, in line with the spirit of Vatican II, entails a fundamental shift in the hierarchy’s perspective, transitioning from one centered on power and authority to one rooted in ministry and service. By embracing the synodal path, the Church can manifest this shift, emphasizing the importance of service and the ministry of all believers, thus focusing on the needs of laypeople:

Jesus founded the Church by setting at her head the Apostolic College, in which the Apostle Peter is the ‘rock’, the one who must confirm his brethren in the faith. But in this church, *as in an inverted pyramid*, the top is located beneath the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called ‘ministers,’ because in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*, the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles. And in a similar perspective, the Successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum*. (Francis 2015)

The concept of an inverted pyramid<sup>2</sup> reverses the long-standing hierarchical structure of the church. The traditional model, which delineated the church into distinct realms of a teaching church and a learning church, created not only intellectual divisions but often practical ones. By inverting the pyramid, Pope Francis has redefined authority as contingent upon acceptance within the church, emphasizing the significance of listening to

and learning from others. In doing so, the Pope has sought to foster a more inclusive and collaborative approach to authority within the ecclesial context (Osheim 2019, p. 371).

Lastly, a listening church demonstrates the capacity to acknowledge, engage with, and endure potential conflicts of interest. It would be erroneous to imagine synodality as a univocal enterprise where members of the church harmoniously concur on all matters. On the contrary, synodality is a lived praxis where conflicts must inevitably arise if everyone's voices ought to be heard. Consequently, the voices emanating from the margins engage in a meaningful dialogue with the church. A conflict that emerges within the framework of the church, grounded in the fundamental values of love, hope, and charity, ultimately enables us to fulfill the expectations inherent in being a listening church—one that earnestly endeavors to heed the voices of every member of the church genuinely (Hinze 2020, pp. 301–2).

Pope Francis has spearheaded a renewal of synodality within the church throughout his papacy. His pastoral messages, both in personal encounters and in his papal teachings, underscore the imperative of reestablishing and reevaluating what it means to be a church. Nevertheless, his ecclesiological framework extends beyond the confines of the church per se. Perhaps the most important facets of the synodal path lie in its capacity to foster reconciliation among the people of God, a reconciliation predicated upon attentiveness to the signs of the times, as postulated in *Gaudium et Spes*.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The U.S. Catholic Church and Racial Justice: Synodality at Odds?

Examining the U.S. American context, it becomes important to explore the characteristics of a listening church and the reasons why a synodal church should prioritize the pursuit of racial justice and reconciliation. For one, systemic racial structures in the United States persist as one of the most pervasive issues of our time, perpetuating ongoing injustices. The resulting harm inflicted upon those who live on the margins disrupts the very fabric of our social structure, necessitating a concerted response as it impacts our collective journeying. Therefore, it underscores the urgency with which a synodal church must prioritize this matter as one of the most pressing ones within the country.

The working document expresses the need to address these unjust structures, although it does so in broad terms. During the synodal session, the members of the church emphasized that “we are called go to every place, especially outside the more familiar territories, ‘leaving the comfortable position of those who give hospitality to allow ourselves to be welcomed into the existence of those who are our companions on the journey of humanity’” (General Secretariat of the Synod 2022, para. 31). To accomplish this, the church must cultivate an environment of attentive listening, “which requires a broader and deeper conversion of attitudes and structures, as well as new approaches to pastoral accompaniments; it begins in a readiness to recognise that the peripheries can be the place where a call to conversion resounds along with the call to put the Gospel more decisively into practice” (General Secretariat of the Synod 2022, para. 32).

The church acknowledges the urgent need to implement a listening and discernment process that is instrumental in finding a pathway toward conversion. A listening church must actively exercise its preferential option for the poor, which means opening oneself up freely to the unknown, accepting the other without hesitation, and embracing each one with their hopes, dreams, worries, and concerns. But, it also means relinquishing elements that wield power over others.

Historically, however, the United States has fallen short of achieving such listening processes, particularly in the realm of racial justice. Scholars have highlighted the hierarchical church's previous efforts toward it but also highlighted numerous deficiencies (Massingale 2010). On the other hand, racial-justice-oriented movements have been resurgent, like Black Lives Matter, which successfully addressed the issue of systematic injustices against people of color. To better understand how the U.S. church, specifically the U.S. Catholic Bishop's Conference (USCCB), can learn from racial justice movements like Black Lives Matter, it is worthwhile to examine the most recent instance in which the USCCB expressed its stance on race-related matters. The pastoral letter “Open Wide Our Hearts” conveyed optimism

regarding racial reconciliation but also revealed certain inadequacies within the church's commitment to becoming a listening church.

### 3.1. *Open Wide Our Hearts*

The 2018 USCCB document "Open Wide Our Hearts" marks the first pastoral letter against racism since the 1979 letter "Brothers and Sisters to Us". Its release came in the wake of ongoing violence against Black people and the aftermath of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In light of current events, the long-awaited and desperately needed pastoral letter includes many laudatory statements that instill hope for racial reconciliation. For one, the USCCB recognizes the presence of individual, public, and institutional manifestations of racism. It addresses various social issues such as de facto segregation, police violence, or the Flint, Michigan, water crisis as components of racist structures within the United States. Furthermore, the USCCB introspectively acknowledges the complicity of certain church members in perpetuating the evil of racism (USCCB 2018, p. 21).

The document is aware that U.S. Catholics must engage with the sin of slavery and its enduring effects. It emphasizes that any sincere effort to combat racism must fully acknowledge and address the intergenerational impacts of "slavery, segregation, and the systemic use of violence—including the lynching of more than 4000 Black men, women, and children across 800 different counties throughout the United States 1877 and 1950" (USCCB 2018, p. 15). In response, the church has made various resources, videos, and discussion guides readily accessible on the USCCB website and has established an ad hoc committee on racism to address these pressing concerns.

In addition, the letter appropriately laments the disparities that disproportionately impact Black communities. In terms of interactions with law enforcement, the document acknowledges that the encounters African Americans have had with law enforcement are driven by "fear and even danger" (USCCB 2018, p. 5), referencing instances such as the killings of unarmed African Americans as a result of encounters with law enforcement as well as the disproportionate number of people of color in our prison systems.

Yet, at the same time, the document appeals directly to law enforcement, rejecting "harsh rhetoric that belittles and dehumanizes law enforcement personnel who labor to keep our communities safe" (USCCB 2018, p. 5). This statement is ill-suited within a document addressing racism for two reasons. First, the document equates justice with law enforcement and law enforcement with morality. Focusing solely on the *de jure* concept of law enforcement as the protector of society disregards the potential for wrongdoings within law enforcement itself. This perspective perpetuates the misconception that law enforcement inherently operates on a strong moral foundation since it serves justice. Secondly, this perspective fails to acknowledge the systemic issue of police brutality, particularly against marginalized communities disproportionately subjected to physical and psychological violence by police officers compared to their White counterparts (Washington Post 2023; Schwartz 2020, pp. 280–82; Pazzanese 2021). These statements undermine previous commendable assertions on racial justice and disregard the systemic problem of police brutality, especially as it affects those on the margins.

The document also differentiates among the distinct forms of racism experienced by individuals of Hispanic, Native American, and African American descent. The letter states, "As this country was forming, Africans were bought and sold as mere property, often beaten, raped, and literally worked to death" (USCCB 2018, p. 13). While such statements are commendable, instances arise within "Open Wide Our Hearts", where the allocation of accountability for these transgressions remains vague. Daniel Horan points out a considerable amount of passive language employed throughout the document, shifting the reader's focus away from the subject and towards the object. As a result, Horan criticizes that "readers are led to believe that oppression, subjugation, genocide, chattel slavery, racist violence, unjust legislation, and so on, merely befell people of color as if by chance" (Horan 2019). The use of the passive voice, thus, is not merely a stylistic choice; it



further accentuates the perceived disconnect between the authors of the letter and those who directly experience the effects of structural racism. By treating these incidents as events that occur outside the realm of the church, the letter inadvertently reinforces a barrier in the relationship between the hierarchical church and those on the peripheries.

Last, the letter calls on Catholics to actively pursue racial justice and proposes practical steps. These encompass acknowledging the complicity of Catholics in the sin of racism, educating people about the nation's legacies of slavery and discrimination, and advocating for racial justice within parishes and broader civic and social institutions. Unfortunately, the letter falls short of a comprehensive analysis of the underlying cause of systemic racial injustices, as noted by theologian Shawnee Daniels-Sykes. Daniels-Sykes raises the question of why the letter fails to critically examine and critique the normative Eurocentric hegemonic racist ideals and practices deeply entrenched in the fabric of the United States (Daniels-Sykes 2019). The absence of addressing white supremacy as a fundamental issue that permeates society and the U.S. Catholic church reveals that racism is treated as an abstract concept by some members of the church. The letter does not clearly explain how racism emerged and manifested itself in American society, nor does it identify the specific bodies responsible. The bishops' statement that "all of us are in need of personal ongoing conversion" (USCCB 2018, p. 7) overlooks the existence of systemic mechanisms that favor certain groups and fails to recognize the unequal distribution of responsibility in the creation and perpetuation of racial injustices.

"Open Wide Our Hearts" marks an important step in addressing the issue of racism and its advocacy for racial injustice and reconciliation. But the letter also shows room for further development in understanding the institutional role of perpetuating systemic injustices and fostering a culture of white privilege.

### 3.2. The Church's White Nucleus

The limited progress made by the U.S. Catholic bishops in addressing racial issues within its own ranks highlights a broader institutional challenge, which concerns the influence of whiteness affecting the church socially<sup>4</sup> and ecclesologically.<sup>5</sup> Whiteness, defined as a "system of hegemonic power that operates to benefit people perceived to be white and to disadvantage people perceived to be of color" (Teel 2012, p. 19), shapes the hierarchical church in ways that perpetuate a top-down approach, where racial injustices are treated as *ad extra* concerns. The absence of meaningful dialogue with those directly affected by racism and the church's broad and abstract statements on racism contribute to a narrative framework in which whiteness fosters detachment between the hierarchy and the marginalized peripheries. This Eurocentric perspective results in Black agencies being viewed as separate from the church community.

The church's entrenchment in whiteness complicates its call for inclusivity. Whiteness serves to obscure the problem of racism in the church. For example, "Open Wide Our Hearts" invites into conversation those on the peripheries, but it still centers white experience. As such, the church ultimately dictates the terms of the inclusion of the marginalized and determines the duration of their presence. Sociologist Elijah Anderson refers to this phenomenon as a "white space", characterized by the overwhelming presence of White people and the absence of Black people (Anderson 2015, p. 13).

The concept of white space within the church aligns with the observations that bishops' statements did not address whiteness or white supremacy. As phenomenologist Sara Ahmed contends, institutions can be deemed "white" when their spatial boundaries are shaped by the proximity of certain bodies while excluding others: "white bodies gather, and cohere to form edges of such space" (Ahmed 2007, p. 157). These white spaces within institutions perpetuate a normative understanding of spatiality that privileges whiteness. Our collective socialization within these spaces reinforces that prevailing white paradigm, which only becomes disrupted when individuals perceived as not belonging to these spaces enter them. For Black people, this presents a perpetual struggle, as they must either endure the inhospitality of white spaces over extended periods, encountering inalienable prejudices

or conform to the norms and rules imposed within those spaces, thereby compromising their sense of selfhood. In the white ecclesial space, Black individuals face ongoing racism, lacking spiritual care and racial awareness. To be accepted, they must disprove stereotypes attributed to their race (Anderson 2015, pp. 13–14).

An instance illustrating the conception of white space between the clergy and the laypeople occurred in Carmel, Indiana, an affluent suburb just outside Indianapolis, in 2020. Within this context, Saint Elizabeth Seton Church, a predominantly White, middle-class parish, assumed an unfortunate prominence when Fr. Ted Rothrock published his weekly church bulletin, addressing the ongoing protests in pursuit of racial justice. In the bulletin, Fr. Rothrock criticizes those who protest in support of Black Lives and the resulting property damages that occurred during these protests. He questioned the organizers' true intention behind these demonstrations in stark words:

Who are the real racists and the purveyors of hate? You shall know them by their works. The only lives that matter are their own and the only power they seek is their own. They are wolves in wolves' clothing, masked thieves and bandits, seeking only to devour the life of the poor and profit from the fear of others. They are maggots and parasites at best, feeding off the isolation of addiction and broken families, and offering to replace any current frustration and anxiety with more misery and greater resentment. (Rothrock 2020)

The parish community met the bulletin with mixed reactions. While some called for Fr. Rothrock's removal, others supported his stance against the movement. In response to mounting pressures from the church community and the public media, Bishop Doherty, from the Diocese of Lafayette in Indiana, offered a pastoral response. He initially suspended Fr. Rothrock but later rescinded his suspension and reassigned him as Missionary Pastor within the diocese. After the initial suspension, Bishop Doherty published a statement on racism in which he affirmed that "racism is wrong". Yet, he was critical of the movement for Black Lives since it "and Antifa promote beliefs and stances that directly contradict Catholic Church teachings. . . . I have never supported those who bring violence to otherwise peaceful demonstrations" (Doherty 2020). Such an example showcases the inherent problem of whiteness. It prompts us to question who is considered a part of the church community and how to create an environment accommodating those who feel excluded. Synodality offers a mode through which individuals can find their voices and establish a sense of inclusion.

The limitation of the synodal pathway for the hierarchical church is thus evident, as its whiteness becomes a fundamental constraint. A church that prioritizes one group over others and fails to acknowledge and accept its complicity is bound to fall short of becoming a listening church. The hierarchy has cultivated a habitus in which whiteness remains invisible to the institutional framework. Movements like Black Lives Matter serve as a necessary counteraction to white ignorance, bringing attention to racial disparities within society and the Church itself. The absence of recognition regarding racial injustices and whiteness' invisibility are among the critical issues that Black Lives Matter brings to the forefront of church members' consciousness. Pastoral letters like "Open Wide Our Hearts" open a path toward healing and reconciliation but also highlight the church's complacency within whiteness, which only becomes visible when seemingly external forces challenge its comfort zone and compel it to confront racial injustices and its own complicity in perpetuating them.

There are ways, however, to overcome such constraints, as Bishop Edward Braxton's two pastoral letters released in 2015 and 2016 highlight. His first letter was titled "The Racial Divide in the United States" and published in response to Pope Francis' 2015 World Day of Peace theme, "No Longer Slaves, But Brothers and Sisters". Bishop Braxton became one of the first Catholic bishops to address the systemic challenges African Americans faced. He acknowledged that while some Christians view these events as mere news, they are life-altering experiences for others. Bishop Braxton emphasized that our "Christmas faith" compels us to confront the racial divide. He provided a list of the horrific killings of

African Americans that sparked debates on race and racial injustices in recent years. He affirmed that not everyone is treated equally in this country and highlighted the divide between dominant and minority groups within our Catholic faith. Although he did not explicitly address the issue of whiteness and white supremacy, Bishop Braxton asserted that the evident power structures in our society conflict with our faith. Drawing from Paul's letter to the Galatians, he contended that in Christ, "*no group constitutes the majority*" (Braxton 2015, para. 76).

A year later, as the debates and protests against racial injustices intensified and Black Lives Matter gained prominence, Bishop Braxton issued another pastoral letter titled "The Catholic Church and the Black Lives Matter Movement: The Racial Divide in the United States Revisited". Adopting a true spirit of listening, parishioners and members from both Black and White communities approached him to engage in a faith-based exploration of the Black Lives Matter movement. Unlike other sources that either praised (Sidner and Simon 2015; Ransby 2017) or condemned (Reynolds 2015; Diaz 2016) the movement, Bishop Braxton approached this topic in a genuinely synodal manner. While acknowledging that elements within the movement contradicted Catholic teachings, he expressed hope that "there may be ways in which the Church and the movement could benefit from a conversation" (Braxton 2016, para. 6).

In his letter, Bishop Braxton delved into the Black Lives Matter movement's history, intentions, and purposes and its various criticisms over time, ranging from the familiar refrain of "All Lives Matter" to critiques within the Black community. The bishop recognized the relatively small presence of the Black Catholic Church in the United States compared to the larger number of White Catholic parishes. However, he argued that the issue lies not solely in numerical factors but in matters of visibility and recognition. Braxton asserted that "if all African American Catholics suddenly disappeared, most White Catholics would not even notice, because they are more or less unaware of African American Catholics" (Braxton 2016, para. 21). The primary concern for Braxton is that "the Catholic Church has not been actively engaged with African American communities at the level of ideas, major movements, and the emergence of Black consciousness" (Braxton 2016, para. 27).

Consequently, the bishop contended that the church could learn from the Black Lives Matter movement by taking the voices of the African American community seriously, actively listening to their concerns, and embracing them as shared concerns of the church itself. By doing so, the church can bridge the gap of awareness and engagement with African American communities, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and transformative dialogue.

While the movement may hold differing views from the church on certain social issues such as marriage, contraception, and homosexuality, and there may appear to be a lack of mutual interest between the two entities due to the church's hierarchical structure, Bishop Braxton is convinced that the church's social teachings can still contribute to the movement, and vice versa. Therefore, "the Church can and will have meaningful conversations with the movement about these issues" (Braxton 2016, para. 27).

#### 4. Social Movements and the Synodal Path: Black Lives Matter

The U.S. church aspires to transform into a listening church. The U.S. National Synthesis Report describes how the synodal experience has enabled thousands of people to convene and reengage with one another. The compounding effects of the pandemic and concurrent socio-political unrest have left an indelible impact on society. Nonetheless, the synodal journey has developed a new "commitment to re-learn the art of listening", a poignant reminder of our collective identity as a pilgrim church (USCCB 2022, p. 12).

As Bishop Braxton's letter connotes, such transformation can be illuminated by examining social movements' internal and external processes. Exploring Black Lives Matter proves to be particularly insightful for various reasons. Not only does the church have a long-standing historical relationship with social movements in the United States (Mich 1998; Nepstad 2019), but social movements serve as synodal microcosms wherein people can develop and refine practices, structures, and spiritualities, which people must actively



engage with and embody in their daily lives. They are gathering places for individuals with shared interests and objectives, providing opportunities to cultivate a distinct cultural ethos nurtured internally and shared externally (Fine 1995, pp. 129–30). Within the framework of synodality, individuals within these movements engage in their own discernment process and, subsequently, share their insights and discernment with the broader church community.

Moreover, Black Lives Matter is a space where cultures are formed, and cultural boundaries are crossed more frequently than in any other context. As previously argued, the magisterium has established, developed, and maintained a predominantly White cultural space, resulting in a self-imposed limitation on the ability to traverse cultural borders. Ideas, thoughts, or theologies that deviate from the established are often met with suspicion. In contrast, Black Lives Matter functions as a think tank where new cultural resources are frequently formulated (Swidler 1995, p. 30).

It is important to acknowledge that analyzing Black Lives Matter also has its limitations. There are some natural boundaries that we must keep in mind when comparing these two entities. The Catholic Church's universal scope spans a wide range of social, political, and theological issues. At the same time, Black Lives Matter emerged in response to contemporary incidents of racial injustice in the United States. In addition, the church's organizational structure is vastly different from Black Lives Matter since the movement operates as a decentralized group without a single centralized authority. Lastly, as a social justice movement, Black Lives Matter utilizes grassroots organizing, protests, advocacy, and raising awareness to effect change. At the same time, the church's mission encompasses religious rituals, sacraments, and community outreach.

Yet, despite these differences, some overlaps allow for an active engagement between the Catholic Church in the United States and the movement. First, it is apparent that church members, both clergy and laity, are deeply invested in racial justice issues.<sup>6</sup> The fact that Catholics identify with the cause, participate in protests, and release pastoral statements in response to Black Lives Matter underscores the need for the church to be attentive to these emerging groups (Williams 2022, pp. 252–56; Pratt 2019; Braxton 2016; Seitz 2019).<sup>7</sup> Second, laypeople are more willing to address racial injustices and express solidarity with Black people on the streets and online. Black Lives Matter has become an integral part of U.S. culture, and as the church follows the call to discern the signs of the times, it must engage meaningfully and constructively with these challenges.

Lastly, despite being labeled a secular movement, Black Lives Matter incorporates religious elements rooted in Black religious traditions. For example, the movement employs profound spiritual language, as it speaks to “intentionally build and nurture a beloved community” (Black Lives Matter Website). Moreover, the secular classification of the movement does not imply its complete detachment from religious influences. Members of Protestant and Catholic communities participate in these movements, infusing them with their religious traditions and practices. Consequently, clear distinctions between the secular and the religious become obsolete within that group. Black Lives Matter has an inherent “messiness” that facilitates the interaction between religion and the secular (Leming 2006; Farrag 2018; Fort 2022). Therefore, a synodal approach enables us to listen to them and engage in mutual learning, particularly in areas that require further development within the U.S. Catholic Church.

One of the key concerns revolves around ensuring accountability and the practical implementation of the synodal process and its outcomes. The objective of social activism is transformative, seeking to address social injustices and establish structures conducive to renewal. Therefore, social movements provide opportunities to discern synodal structures illuminating how the Spirit operates in the world today. Although the movement can be viewed as secular and critical of the church,<sup>8</sup> it is important not to dismiss it as incongruent with its teachings. Black Lives Matter exemplifies an approach to “listening” that one considers synodal, particularly in the context of racial justice. Therefore, I will examine how Black Lives Matter effectively embodies the three fundamental aspects of listening—

inclusion, truthfulness, and conflict—in a productive manner and how the church may learn from such an approach.

#### 4.1. *Synodal Practices within Black Lives Matter*

As outlined earlier, the process of listening consists of three elements that the church must meet to listen in a synodal way: there must be a general receptivity toward the other, with an emphasis on inclusivity; the church must be open to listening to the truth, that is the lived experiences of the People of God regarding systemic racism; and lastly, it must embrace the potential for conflict in a positive manner. I suggest that Black Lives Matter fulfills these requirements as they work toward restoring the human dignity of those who live on the margins and, therefore, may serve as an example of how the church can become a listening church.

##### 4.1.1. Inclusion

Cultivating an inclusive environment is crucial in transforming the church into a listening community. There are two key areas in which the church falls short. First, as evidenced in documents such as “Open Wide Our Hearts”, the church’s institutional structure often presents a pre-conciliar understanding in which the magisterium appears disconnected from the laity. This leads to a superficial treatment of racial injustices without deeper analysis. In contrast, Black Lives Matter embraces a decentralized approach that provides an appealing space for individuals to express themselves and to be heard. While decentralized organizations also have drawbacks,<sup>9</sup> they offer an authentic environment that fosters introspection and discernment, ensuring that every voice is valued, as its founding principles are based on egalitarian dialogue. Of course, equating the institutional church with a decentralized organization such as Black Lives Matter would be erroneous. However, such a juxtaposition invites us to reconsider our relationship with one another and how we can instill inclusion in a synodal way. Alicia Garza elucidates that the movement comprises various entities guided by leadership rooted in the community. It is this communal disposition that serves as a catalyst for transformative change. As Garza puts it, “When you’re in community you know that the things you do impact other people and people know that the things that they do impact you, and so it shapes your decision making. . . . And we recognize, right, that there is no one organization or one individual that can make the changes that we all so desperately need and deserve” (Jackson 2021, pp. 12–13). To flourish within the Christian community, we are compelled to ask what does community-oriented decision-making look like in relation to becoming an inclusive church? The first step in the synodal discernment process necessitates listening to the local churches and how faith is expressed in different cultures and contexts.

Second, Black Lives Matter places a strong emphasis on remembrance. Patrisse Cullors articulated this in an interview, stating, “I feel like part of the story in the building of BLM was about remembering—and remembering our people, not based off a white supremacist memory . . . but instead remembering them from the place that their mothers and their fathers and their family would want us to remember them in” (Molina 2020). The process of *anamnesis*, intentionally remembering the victims, the deceased, and the exploited, lies at the core of Black Lives Matter’s promotion of communal discernment (Copeland 2010; Copeland 2016). This level of authenticity enables a deeper engagement with their stories and a heightened concern for systemic issues.

Lastly, Black Lives Matter demonstrates a radical embrace of others: cis-gender individuals, members of the LGBTQIA community, and those who are gender non-conforming. But it took some time to understand the importance of giving them this space even for the movement. Cullors said that “we did little to ensure their visibility, to lift up the fact that our work is being advanced by an extraordinary number of Transwomen and men. The most criminalized people on the planet are Black Transwomen who cannot pass. We resolve, as a movement, to ensure that never happens again” (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2018, p. 216). The visibility of members of the LGBTQIA community within Black Lives Matter has become an

important aspect of the movement, continuing to strengthen community members through marches and calling out the injustices they face ([Branson-Potts and Stiles 2020](#)).

How can the church become more visibly inclusive? It must adopt discerning practices that foster personal growth and authenticity. Discernment involves an ongoing process of seeking the good in one's life and society and determining the necessary actions, processes, or structures to realize these aspirations. Both individual and communal dimensions of discernment are intertwined, wherein individuals pursue the good and influence of one another through introspection. In contrast, communal discernment as a collective endeavor of conscientious decision making inspires transformative experiences at the individual level.

Notably, the engagement of the laity is important for communal discernment. However, suppose the laity does not feel listened to. In that case, the discernment process risks excluding the voices at the margins, those most directly affected by injustices and residing on the peripheries. Black Lives Matter exemplifies creating space for these marginalized voices and facilitating communal conversations that prioritize listening practices. In this context, Ladislav Orsy, SJ, characterizes communal discernment as "the fruit of a communal enterprise", which "includes the sharing of all available data, the articulation of many insights into the known facts, the formulation of definite judgments, and the making of decisions. It includes even more an alertness to the movements of grace in each throughout the whole process" ([Ahern 2015](#), p. 149).

In order to embody the character of a listening church, the church must create an authentic space where victims of racial injustices can be listened to and engage in the process of communal discernment with those voices. Black Lives Matter has demonstrated the power of discernment and introspection when one gives all voices a platform. By actively engaging with people on the peripheries and attentively considering their lived experiences, the church can take initial steps towards realizing Pope Francis' vision and fostering social trust both within its own community and in society at large ([Keenan 2023](#)).

#### 4.1.2. Receptivity to Truth

If we consider Black Lives Matter as a movement that promotes inclusivity and embraces minority groups, we can observe that it also fosters an environment that enables speaking of and listening to the truth. As understood by Black Lives Matter, the concept of truth is rooted in the lived experiences of its members and oppressed communities. Focusing on the narratives of its members allows the movement to address the reality of systemic racial injustices.

As previously stated, the church lacks substantial representation from marginalized voices when discussing the sin of racism in the United States. Regarding Black Lives Matter, the church has not officially endorsed the term. While there have been instances of individual priests, nuns, or laypeople publicly supporting the movement, most of these endorsements come from Black community members who have personally experienced racial injustices within the country ([National Black Catholic Congress 2015](#)).

What alternatives exist for individuals who cannot find a space within a church that does not recognize or value the importance of their voices? In other words, how can the church create an environment that allows for the expression and inclusion of these voices? In the example of St. Elizabeth Seton parish, the parish community failed to seize an opportunity to practice synodal listening within its confines. Fr. Rothrock's remarks resembled a familiar discourse characterized by sentiments of mistrust, dissemination of misinformation, and the propagation of hate speech. To confront the prevalent conception of whiteness permeating this parish, a synodal approach would be for the parish to initiate a dialogue between parishioners and Black Lives Matter members. This conversation could be structured around an exploration of the nature of anti-Black biases and the systemic manifestation of racism. Such a form of truth telling, in which individuals from marginalized populations share their experiences with others, could engender a dialogue

that transcends the commonly encountered dichotomous assessment of the movement and its objectives.

Black Lives Matter has provided a space where individuals feel heard and acknowledged, where their voices hold significance. Its call for Black liberation and restoring the dignity of Black lives was a unifying force, fostering solidarity among its members and establishing a collective identity. Building a collective identity and promoting trust among participants determine any group's success and longevity (Jasper 1998; Suh and Reynolds-Stenson 2018). Black Lives Matter may serve as an example of how to acknowledge and facilitate conversations around race and racism. It provided a platform for individuals to share their experiences of racial injustices in the United States. Black Lives Matter affirms the inherent value of all Black people, as Alicia Garza describes: "Black Lives Matter affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers on those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements" (Garza 2014).

Once a space of collective identity and trust is established, people can address the truth regarding racial injustices within the church. These personal narratives serve as the foundation for the movement's discerning and listening practices, empowering its members to raise their voices in support of Black Lives continually. Hebah Farrag highlights that the movement's success lies in its emphasis on working toward a transcendent goal rather than in opposition to something. This transcendent element contributes to the movement's resilience and vitality:

The Movement for Black Lives sees itself as the current embodiment in a legacy of spirit-infused social justice work. There is a veneration for the sacred duty of the freedom fighter and a dream for the day it will no longer be necessary. . . . The movement for Black lives works towards the goal of not just racial justice, but freedom of the mind and the spirit. It encourages "healing justice", so that people can heal from trauma and engage as the best version of themselves. The movement infuses a syncretic blend of African and indigenous cultures' spiritual practices and beliefs, embracing ancestor worship; Ifa-based ritual such as chanting, dancing, and summoning deities; and healing practices such as acupuncture, reiki, therapeutic massage, and plant medicine in much of its work, including protest. (Farrag 2020)

These spiritual practices have profound implications for community engagement and sustained social activism (Faver 2000). The willingness to embrace truth cultivates a renewed sense of dignity. Black Lives Matter has provided a forum wherein the truth of systemic racism in this country and the painful experiences endured by its victims may be earnestly recognized and acknowledged. This authenticity plays a vital role in reclaiming a sense of selfhood that has been systematically stripped away from the Black community.

Fortunately, those conversations have already begun. The U.S. National Synthesis Report for the 2023 synod has articulated the need to initiate discerning processes concerning racism and racial structures within and beyond the church. It states that "the sinfulness of racism fueled by events in our country in recent years must also remain a present concern and be acknowledged by our Church. As we do so, we must continue to listen" (USCCB 2022, p. 9). The synthesis underscores the significance of addressing the issues of racism and the need to provide platforms for conversations on race to allow all voices to be heard. If synodal practices allow room for those conversations to occur, then there is hope for racial reconciliation.

Finally, the focus shifts toward openly addressing the issue of racial injustices. Truth-telling involves confronting the falsehoods perpetuating racial inequality and acknowledging the historical and ongoing oppression, discrimination, and violence marginalized communities face. Truth-telling does not serve as a mere apology for the past; instead, it requires an honest recognition of the current realities. It involves revisiting the past to gain a deeper understanding and liberating ourselves from the narratives that constrain us. Speaking the truth becomes the initial step toward collective transformation and com-

munal liberation. We must confront the distorted realities that undermine civic unity, and the healing process can only commence by accepting our complicity and the existence of these injustices.

As Bryan Massingale points out, one characterizes the church as a “‘white racist institution’ . . . [because of] the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons—and only these—are standard, normative, universal, and truly Catholic” (Massingale 2010, p. 80). Embracing this final step is undoubtedly challenging for a synodal church, as it necessitates a fundamental repositioning as a culpable participant in the face of racial injustices. It requires relinquishing power and embracing vulnerability. However, if the church truly desires to become a listening church, it must discern ways to amplify the voices from the margins. Black Lives Matter ought not to be regarded as an entity devoid of any intersections with the church. Rather, it should be fully integrated in the church’s listening process.

#### 4.1.3. Conflict

If the church wishes to demonstrate a general receptiveness to the authentic voices of its members, namely the lived experiences of the faithful, it must ultimately be prepared to confront and acknowledge the presence of conflict within its own ranks. Much like in our daily lives, conflict is an inevitable reality that cannot be resolved through denial or avoidance of important issues. Within the church, a notable degree of mistrust exists regarding how the institution addresses the persistent threats of systemic racism, whiteness, and white supremacy. However, it is important to recognize that conflict has the potential to contribute to the pursuit of human dignity through God’s grace (Henderson-Espinoza 2019).

Conflict is not only a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives but also an intrinsic and inevitable aspect of movement formation. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between external and internal conflicts. External conflicts refer to disputes between a movement and external organizations or groups of people, while internal conflicts pertain to the dynamics within the movement itself. Since social movements are constantly engaged with larger political and cultural forces, which are inherently fluid and dynamic, they must respond to diverse challenges and opportunities. Consequently, they may need to adjust their movement goals to navigate the shifting landscape effectively.<sup>10</sup> Such adjustments can give rise to tensions within movements as different agents hold varying perspectives on addressing the day-to-day challenges they encounter. While some movements may falter and disband because of these contentions, others find ways to negotiate and adapt accordingly.

Within the context of Black Lives Matter, the presence of conflict is a recurring phenomenon in daily life. Recognizing the decentralized structure inherent to its organization, it openly concedes that conflict is bound to arise, yet it also regards conflict as an essential component of their work. Black Lives Matter members believe engaging with conflict allows them to identify “where ruptures and misalignment live” (Hemphill 2018). Black Lives Matter acknowledges the potential drawbacks of internal conflicts, such as losing focus, possible fractures in relationships, and the reinforcement of negative associations typically attributed to conflict. Yet, it approaches conflict as a challenge that one can address through effective modes of communication and dialogue:

For conflict that does not indicate more challenging issues like violence and abusive patterns, direct communication is often the most fruitful way of addressing it and intervening. When we talk about direct communication we are talking about our ability to state our understanding of what happened, the impact it had on us and the requests or boundaries that have emerged as a result. We can show our emotions, our hurt, anger, frustration while not trying to take away another’s dignity or humanity. (Hemphill 2018)

While addressing issues that give rise to conflict can be challenging, doing so presents an opportunity to confront and address significant concerns within a community. Engaging in open communication that upholds the dignity of all parties involved can foster invigorating and productive conversations. Rather than viewing conflict as a divisive force, we



will be able to see conflict “not necessarily as the splinters that lead inevitably to division, but to think of conflict instead as a generative moment, an opportunity to learn something about each other and the systems that we’ve created in our chapters” (Hemphill 2018).

Black Lives Matter recognizes the inevitability of conflict in the daily life of a movement. Rather than avoiding or suppressing it, the movement actively addresses moments of contention, recognizing their potential for personal and communal growth. Creating a space where voices are heard, concerns are addressed, and genuine listening occurs fosters a community built on trust and mutual development. Within the synodal pathway of the church, a genuinely receptive approach to listening will inherently lead to conflict. Contested questions about the church’s teaching on abortion, contraception, ordination of women, married clergy, and the inclusion (or lack of inclusion) of the LGBTQIA+ community will cause disagreement, and there will always be animosities and passionate discussions in the church and the world. Nevertheless, the synodal pathway shows how we can avoid destructive forms of polarization and learn to discover ways to embrace differentiating viewpoints as a creative way of *being* church. In the context of racial justice, marginalized voices will speak out about ongoing systematic issues within society and the church’s complicity in perpetuating whiteness and white supremacy. The Catholic Church must not view these conflicts as barriers but as starting points for healing and transformation. Journeying together entails acknowledging the pains and concerns of others. Conflict, when approached constructively, can change individuals and shape the collective journey of the church.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts

The journey the church has embarked on undeniably has potential. It opens the doors for communal dialog and truly coming together as a People of God. Nevertheless, as I have outlined in this article, much work still remains. Should the U.S. Catholic Church aspire to earnestly embrace Pope Francis’ call to transform into a church that prioritizes listening, it must discuss ways to improve in the areas of inclusion, truthfulness, and constructive conflict.

Black Lives Matter emerged out of a need and despair as some members of our communities feel ignored and devalued. It is a call to stand up for the dignity of those who live on the margins and addresses people’s concerns in a manner that appears congruent with and beneficial to the Church’s theme of synodality. Despite all the different opinions and moral dispositions that the church and Black Lives Matter may have, I suggest that we gain valuable insights from its processes regarding racial justice and discerning one’s own complicity in these structures. Black Lives Matter’s emphasis on inclusivity, amplifying life experiences, and addressing systemic racism can guide the church toward improved discussions on race relations in the United States. By acknowledging the lessons and insights from Black Lives Matter, the church can take meaningful steps toward racial justice and reconciliation.

The U.S. Catholic Church must embrace a synodal approach that listens to the voices of marginalized communities and engages with the realities of racial injustice. By recognizing its own complicity and learning from Black Lives Matter, the church can transform into a more inclusive and compassionate institution better equipped to address the pressing issues of systemic racism in society.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For an approach on how lived narratives can reinvigorate our understanding of the church (see Imperatori-Lee 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> Ormond Rush (2017) has examined the roots of Pope Francis’ “inverted pyramid”, focusing on the vision of the Second Vatican Council and the centrality of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God.
- <sup>3</sup> For an analysis of Francis’ theology of synodality (see Faggioli 2020).

- 4 Theologian Eric Martin has addressed at length how the problem of whiteness and white supremacy poses an increasing challenging for the U.S. church which they are currently unable to address adequately. The risks for such passivity are immense: “The threat is not that white nationalists will take over the Catholic Church. The threat is that the Catholic Church harbors a culture sufficiently friendly to white nationalism that people can comfortably embrace both the faith and the most extreme forms of racial hatred” (Martin 2020).
- 5 Joseph Flipper describes that, historically, the bishops’ letters against racism have consistently portrayed blackness as being outside of American Catholicism’s ecclesiology. Despite the calls for white Catholics to end discriminatory and segregationist practices, they omit talking about the specific repercussions for Catholic institutions. They avoid confronting such issues by denying that Black, Latinx or Native Americans are Catholics. Instead, they portray, blackness and other minority cultures, as the ecclesial outer, which is geographically external and powerless to influence the church’s internal structures (See Flipper 2021). For a description on white ecclesiology see, pp. 428–29.
- 6 To gain an overview of the movement’s history and its relation to the Catholic Church (see Segura 2021).
- 7 Shannen Dee Williams has described how Black Sisters actively joined the protests for Black lives (Williams 2022, pp. 252–56; See also Pratt 2019; Braxton 2016; Seitz 2019).
- 8 Alicia Garza responded to the question, whether she would welcome presence of Catholic clergy in their actions, stating that “There’s such a gap between the practice of our values and for me to imagine that the church, that the Catholic Church in particular, would close that gap” (Segura 2021, p. 20).
- 9 Social movements are always in tension between the institutional demands of the organization and the practical application of its mission. For decentralized movements like Black Lives Matter, the threat of moving away from the original intent of the movement’s existence. Absence of structure, accountability, or distinct leadership figures group cohesion may be threatened (See Ahern 2015, pp. 155–65).
- 10 In social movement theory, scholars identify those adjustments as “frame alignments”. Movements operate in frames, which is a concept of how people organize, communicate, and navigate the world they live in. According to sociologists Robert Benford and David Snow, frame alignments fulfill three purposes for social movements. “It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement organizations or movement activists. And it is contentious in the sense that it involves the generation of interpretative frames that not only differ from existing ones but that may also challenge them. The resultant products of this framing activity are referred to as “collective action frames” (Benford and Snow 2000, p. 614).

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