

“African-American History Month: The Drama of Haiti, the NAACP, and Brothers and Sisters to Us”

**Homily delivered at the Mass Commemorating the 81st Birthday of Rev. Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr.**

(Readings: Isaiah 32, 15-20, James 3, 13-18, Matthew 10, 26-33)

**Diocese of Phoenix
Basilica of St. Mary
Monday, January 18, 2010
3:00 PM**

**The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton
Bishop of Belleville**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I. Introduction

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was only thirty-nine when he was murdered on April 4, 1968. As we commemorate his eighty-first birthday, we note with painful hearts that he has been gone for forty-two years. He has been gone longer than he lived! For Americans of a certain age, his image is a grainy black and white news video. His incomparable voice is all but drowned out by the latest popular music on their iPod. He is no longer a man of the present. For them, he is a man of past history. However, the African-American Catholic community in the Diocese of Phoenix, which numbers itself only in hundreds, along with all Americans, and the entire human family, need this prophetic Nobel Peace Laureate, now more than ever, as a man of the present, a man of today.

We gather for Mass in this historic Basilica of St. Mary to listen to the Word of God, to give thanks for the amazing grace of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to be nourished by His Body and Blood in the Eucharist. We assemble to honor Dr. King on the eve of African-American History Month, in the one hundred and first year of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, thirty-one years since “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” and just six days after a catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake unleashed unimaginable devastation, death, and suffering on the people of Port-au-Prince in Haiti. The Scriptures just proclaimed (Isaiah 32, 15-20, James 3, 13-18, Matthew 10, 26-33) will guide our reflection.

In our first reading the prophet Isaiah announced: “The spirit from on high will be poured out on us. Then will the desert become an orchard and the orchard be regarded as a forest. Right will dwell in the desert and justice will abide in the orchard.... My people will live in peaceful country, in secure dwellings and quiet resting places” (Is 32, 15-17). In many ways the experience of the long suffering people of Haiti has been the opposite of Isaiah’s vision. It would be unacceptable to Dr. King for us to honor his memory and ignore the kinship between African-Americans and the descendants of Africans in Haiti. We are bound together by the Middle Passage.

Just as he did not hesitate to turn our eyes to the moral challenges of the war in Viet Nam, Dr. King would not hesitate to turn our eyes to the moral challenges of Haiti. He would applaud the consciousness raising that has come about by the designation of February as African-American History Month, highlighting the death of Frederick Douglass (February 20, 1885) and the birth of President Abraham Lincoln (February 12, 1809) in that month. Yet, he would call us to a deeper awareness that every month is African-American History Month, Hispanic-American History Month, and Chinese-American History Month. This month, and next month and every month in the years ahead should also be Haitian History Month. He would want us to come to a better understanding of the United States role in Haiti's past in order to grasp better our possible contribution to Haiti's future. Surveying our strife-torn world, Dr. King's vision of the ultimate unity of all people might cause him to long for All Humanity's History Month.

II. The Drama of Haiti

“Bewildered we are, and passion-tossed,
mad with the madness
of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people;
straining at the arm posts of Thy Throne, we raise our
shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of
our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by
the very blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth
this? Tell us the Plan; give us the Sign!
Keep not thy silence, O God!”

As a man of the present, Dr. King would understand well why these words W. E. Burghardt Du Bois uttered in 1906, giving voice to the outrage and great fear in the hearts of People of Color in the United States, might be on the tongues of our brothers and sisters in Haiti in the midst of what one wailing victim called their Hell on earth. He would rejoice that in spite of so much heartbreak, the Haitian spirit remains resilient and full of faith and hope. He would surely tell us that we must strive to be the “Sign” of God's love for them. We must make the “Plan,” made manifest in the Cross and resurrection of Christ, visible to our suffering brothers and sisters.

The indescribable destruction that unfolded on Tuesday afternoon, January 12, 2010, has filled the eyes of the world with images of unspeakable suffering in one of the poorest countries on earth. The number of those who have died (more than 250,000!), who have been seriously injured, left homeless, or orphaned in this nightmare will never be accurately determined. The dead lie on the streets unburied. Many of the sick, the injured, and the starving go unaided. The unbearable lightness of being!

Haiti is 80% Catholic and there is a large Catholic presence in Port-au-Prince. Priests, deacons, religious sisters and brothers, seminarians, lay workers, and families have all suffered from this calamitous disaster. The dedicated Archbishop of Port-au-Prince, the Most Reverend Joseph Serge Miot, 63, was among the first to be identified among those who have perished. Numerous Catholic churches, schools, hospitals, seminaries, social service centers and the historic 1749 landmark National Cathedral, Our Lady of the Assumption have all been destroyed. Days after the earthquake, Bishop Guy Sansaricq, a Haitian native and an Auxiliary Bishop of Brooklyn, NY, who was ordained a priest in that Cathedral, shared with me his hope that the deep Catholic faith of the people and the material and spiritual support of neighbors in the United States and around the world will help his fellow Haitians to endure this terrible ordeal.

The United States has a long and complex relationship with the economic, political, and cultural realities that contribute to Haiti's unique history and identity, which has been marked by external exploitation, internal corruption, and political instability. The Catholic Church also has a long, complex relationship to the country originating with the colonizing presence of France. Tragically, the population of Haiti, predominantly of African origins, is the result of the hundreds of thousands of human beings brought from West Africa and "sold" to land owners to work their coffee, sugar, indigo, and tobacco plantations. The scourge of human slavery, which was institutionalized in 1685 under the *Code Noir* of King Louis XIV in what was then called Saint-Domingue, has been a permanent wound on the Haitian soul.

Dr. King would not fail to point out that the plight of the enslaved Africans in Haiti was not unlike the plight of their brothers and sisters enslaved in the United States. They worked under the most inhuman and violent conditions. Many died very young. Yet, thousands more were brought to take their places. Just as cotton enriched the plantation owners in the South, sugar cane enriched the French land owners in Haiti. It is estimated that more than five hundred thousand Africans were toiling for France in Haiti in 1791 when they began their rebellion against their oppressors. That struggle lasted more than ten years, led by Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. After years of bloody conflict, the African people freed themselves from their captors. It is significant that when the free Republic of Haiti was born on January 1, 1804, the Haitians created their new flag by removing the white middle portion between the red and blue of the French flag leaving the blue and red of a flag that, sadly, had not symbolized liberty, equality, and fraternity for the African people.

The 1776 Declaration of Independence of the United States did not declare the independence of the African people held in bondage. Nevertheless, it was a significant influence on the 1789 French Declaration on the Rights of Man. Yet, France did not recognize the rights of Haitian men. The United States did not welcome Haiti's liberation from France. Many American plantation owners feared that the spirit of freedom filling the hearts of Africans in Haiti might fill the hearts of their own chattel laborers who were only a few hundred miles away. Rather than embracing the new Haitian Republic, the United States imposed major trade embargoes on the fledgling nation adding to the impoverishment of the people. Haiti was finally recognized almost sixty years later by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. In the next century the Haitian people experienced a major American military presence beginning in 1915 and suffered from internal corruption and dictators, especially François Duvalier and his son, Jean Claude Duvalier whose oppressive dictatorships spanned from 1957 to 1986.

Dr. King would not want us to ignore the part that France, the United States, some members of the Catholic Church and some Haitians themselves have played in the history of suffering in this tiny nation. But he would want us to be grateful for the gradual change in the posture of modern France and the United States toward Haiti. He would encourage the efforts that these and other countries are making on behalf of Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake. Yet, he would insist that long term assistance and cooperation will be needed if there is to be hope for economic and political stability in an independent Haiti. He would stress the importance of helping Haitians help themselves. Though not a student of Catholicism, Dr. King would readily acknowledge the major positive impact that the Catholic Church has had in Haiti. The Church's work in education, healthcare, housing, grass roots social service programs, and its outspoken advocacy on behalf of the poor is unrivaled. He would also appreciate the way that contemporary Catholic Christianity in Haiti has given a fuller expression to its appreciation of the dignity and equality of all people.

Dr King might well say this could be Haiti's hour. Television commentators need not continue to lament, "Poor Haiti!" After the long, sad months of burying the uncountable number of citizens who have died, rebuilding homes and businesses according to proper standards, developing fair and just political processes, and with the appropriate resources from the world community, Haiti could at long last be on a path to authentic statehood. Sustained by an unquenchable faith, the survivors of this calamity might finally be able to cry out in Isaiah's words, "My people will live in peaceful country, in secure dwellings and quiet resting places."

III. In the Midst of Suffering: Where is God?

Most people think of Dr. King as a "drum major for justice and a troubadour for peace." They often overlook his erudite knowledge of philosophy and theology. His studies at Crozer Theological Seminary, his doctoral studies in systematic theology at Boston University, and his extensive personal research and rigorous intelligence well equipped him to understand the inevitable theological questions that arise in the aftermath of such a terrifying and destructive event. Much of the economic, political, and social turmoil endured by Haitians before the earthquake can be attributed to sinfulness, to the cruel, evil deeds of men. When people raise their hands to harm their sisters and brothers, like the Islamic extremists and terrorists who hijacked the planes on September 11, 2001, we plainly see this as moral evil committed by individuals who ignore Christ's mandate, "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" (Lk 6, 31). However, when there is an earthquake, a tsunami, or a devastating hurricane, there is no human being to take responsibility. It is not an act of man.

Is such an event an act of nature or an act of God? If it is an act of nature, why does God not control nature? If God is powerless in the face of nature, then how can we say God is concerned about every human person? In this afternoon's reading from St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said "Not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair on your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything" (Mt 10, 29-31).

Dr. King's belief in an all just God would not allow him to embrace statements such as, "The earthquake is a divine punishment for the sins of the Haitian people. The innocent people who perished with the sinful are in heaven, and happy to be out of this world." Nor would he be comfortable with the common expression, "There but for the grace of God, go I." This implied that those who did not perish were protected by God's grace, but that grace was withheld from those who lost their lives. Some commentators have said, "Those who escaped the earthquake now realize that God did not want to "take" them at this time. God still has some special work in mind for them to do. It was not their time." Others countered that with, "That does not make sense. I don't believe that it was "time" for a quarter of a million people to die. It just happened. That's all." For Dr. King, steeped in the study of Scripture, questions concerning an all powerful God and the awe filled suffering that innocent people experience are at the heart of the Old Testament book of Job and as old as the human spirit. As his sermons reveal, Dr. King struggled with these questions all of his life. Neither Scripture, tradition nor the reflections of theologians and philosophers through the centuries have answered these questions in a way that everyone finds satisfactory. Some people have become atheists and agnostics after reflecting on terrible events of great suffering such as the earthquake. Many others embrace a more profound and more nuanced faith.

To those who ask why God does not "fix" the world and banish natural disasters, Dr. King would no doubt reply: God does not ordinarily interrupt events in nature or acts of people in order to prevent dire consequences in the lives of innocent people. We may ask why this is so?

Some say it is so that God can draw good (such as the outpouring of love and compassion in Haiti) out of these dire consequences. Others say they simply do not know why. Perhaps the only answer is the answer of St. Paul to the Corinthians. “We see now through a glass darkly. But then face to face”(1 Cor, 13,11). Dr. King would turn our eyes to Christ Himself, who in complete innocence suffered the painful death on the cross, even though the night before in Gethsemane He begged His Father to take the cup of suffering away from Him. In the end He said, “Not my will but your will be done.”

However, because he was very attentive to the cries of the human spirit, Dr. King would acknowledge that the Christian faith does not teach us that we gain the answers to all of life’s difficult questions in this life. He would understand those who are disturbed by religious leaders who simply ignore the dilemma and say, “We simply have to accept this terrible earthquake as something that fits into God’s inscrutable plan, which is beyond our understanding.” He learned as a young man on his knees, on the streets of Selma, and on the balcony in Memphis that God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God.

As Catholics we believe that God created and loves every human person in the world. It is not His will that innocent people suffer. Nor is all suffering somehow a punishment due to sin. Recall the story in John’s gospel where the apostles asked Jesus whether the man born blind was blind because of his sin or the sin of his parents. Jesus answered that it was not because of anyone’s sin. We believe that God knows us better than we know ourselves and that everything that happens to us is mysteriously within Divine Providence. God calls us to love Him with our whole being and to love every other human being as we love our selves. While God does not eliminate suffering from our lives, He does not abandon us when we suffer. In some way, beyond our comprehension, through the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Christ, the compassionate God suffers with us.

IV. Do Not Let Men Intimidate You: The NAACP

If Dr. King of the present, of the here and now, would be disappointed if we had ignored our brothers and sisters in Haiti during this Mass in their hour of dread, he would be equally disappointed if we did not reflect on African-Americans and African-American Catholics at this historic juncture. One hundred years have passed since the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, thirty-one years have passed since the Bishops of the United States published “Brothers and Sisters to Us”, and, to the amazement of the world, Barack Obama, a man whose very being embodies the American vision of unity in diversity, presides in the Oval Office as President at an hour when our nation faces immense challenges at home and abroad. Dr. King would surely be bewildered to note that the President’s historic election has led to erroneous observations in the media suggesting that America has entered a “post-racial era.”

Turning again to our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says to us, “Do not let men intimidate you...What I tell you from in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, speak from the housetops” (Mt 10, 26-27). Though Dr. King’s birthday became a federal holiday in 1986, the holiday was opposed here in Arizona by a governor, a senator, and a significant number of residents. However, they eventually relented. “Do not let men intimidate you!” More recently, in 2005, as the Hispanic population in this state continued to grow and the debate over so called “illegal aliens” intensified, the Bishops of this state courageously published the pastoral letter, “You Welcomed Me” (“Ustedes Me Acogieron”). The Bishops wrote that Arizona had become a focal point of the immigration debate in recent years, given the concentration of border crossings at the Arizona-Mexico border, the record number of migrant deaths, and the growing

presence of civilian patrol groups. They asked you, the Catholic people, to welcome immigrants into your parishes, whether documented or undocumented. They urged you to work to reform the immigration laws in an effort to facilitate immigration and stem the growing number of migrant deaths at the border between the United States and Mexico. Surely you can hear Dr. King saying, “Concern for struggling migrants, concern for struggling Haitians, and concern for struggling African-Americans is born from the same Christ-centered regard for the dignity and worth of every human person. Do not let men intimidate you!”

“Do not let men intimidate you!” The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was formed partly in response to the continuing horrific practice of public lynching and the 1908 race riot in Springfield, the capital of Illinois and resting place of President Abraham Lincoln. Appalled at the violence that was committed against African-Americans, about sixty people, only seven of whom were African-Americans, met to plan a response. The group, which included W. E. B. Du Bois (the first African-American permitted to earn a doctorate from Harvard University) and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, issued a call for racial equality on February 12, 1909, the centennial of Lincoln's birth. They believed that Lincoln's birthday should be a time for taking stock of the nation's progress since 1865. Building on the vision of a “mighty current of change” in Du Bois' Niagara Movement, which started in 1905 in a meeting near Niagara Falls, the NAACP's goal from the start was to secure for all people the rights guaranteed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, which promised an end to slavery, the equal protection of the law, and the right for all adult males to vote. During their second gathering in New York, in May, 1910, one hundred years ago this spring, the group was organized into a permanent body taking the name the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The fledgling organization quickly learned how to harness the power of publicity which it demonstrated in its 1915 battle against D. W. Griffith's inflammatory *Birth of a Nation*, a major event in motion picture history, which glorified the Ku Klux Klan and perpetuated racist stereotypes of African-Americans. To this day, the NAACP continues the struggle to remove all barriers of racial discrimination making use of just laws and the sometimes slow moving wheels of democracy. Their achievements are too numerous to chronicle. Were it not for the changes in American society brought about by the NAACP, there would surely be no President Obama. Perhaps, there would be no African-American Bishops either. “Do not let men intimidate you!”

While there have been and continue to be Catholic members of the NAACP, the social teachings of the Catholic Church have not had a major impact on what has become the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization. By the same token, the NAACP has not had a major direct impact on the Catholic Church. Both, however, might have benefited significantly from each other in the last century.

V. Brothers and Sisters to Us: Thirty-One Years Later

In 1958, the American Bishops condemned the blatant forms of racism that divided Americans by discriminatory laws and enforced segregation. They stressed that denying human beings their God-given rights and their dignity as children of God was a moral evil. Again in 1968 the Bishops decried the fact that racism remained a continuing scandal in America. They called for decisive action to eradicate it from American society. Their most forthright and prophetic statement was the 1979 Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day, “Brothers and Sisters to Us.”

In an unvarnished assessment, they wrote, "Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church. Despite apparent advances and even significant changes in the last two decades, the reality of racism remains. In large part it is only external appearances which have changed." (1991 Revised Edition, USCCB, p.1)

They made it clear that racism is not simply a "social problem"; it is a moral evil. "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 race. 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." (4) 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." (p.3)

The Bishops, fully aware of the extraordinary efforts of so many in the Church to combat racism and uproot it from the Church, acknowledged sadly what many African-Americans experienced on a daily basis. "How great, therefore, is that sin of racism which weakens the Church's witness as the universal sign of unity among all peoples! How great the scandal given by racist Catholics who make the Body of Christ, the Church, a sign of racial oppression! Yet all too often the Church in our country has been for many a "white Church," a racist institution." (p.8)

In one voice the Bishops challenged the Church and the country to recognize the economic impact of racism.

"In response to this mood, we wish to call attention to the persistent presence of racism and in particular to the relationship between racial and economic justice. Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society. Movement toward authentic justice demands a simultaneous attack on both evils. Our economic structures are undergoing fundamental changes which threaten to intensify social inequalities in our nation. We are entering an era characterized by limited resources, restricted job markets and dwindling revenues. In this atmosphere, the poor and [People of Color] are being asked to bear the heaviest burden of the new economic pressures." (p.1-2)

"As economic pressures tighten, those people who are...poor slip further into the unending cycle of poverty, deprivation, ignorance, disease, and crime. Racial identity is for them an iron curtain barring the way to a decent life and livelihood. The economic pressures exacerbate racism, particularly where poor white people are competing with [poor African-Americans and Hispanics] for limited job opportunities. The Church must not be unmindful of these economic pressures. We must be sensitive to the unfortunate and unnecessary racial tension that results from this kind of economic need." (p.2)

The most distressing thing about rereading these words thirty-one years after they were written is the fact that they could be printed in tomorrow morning's paper without changing a word and retain their truth. Equally distressing is the fact that many American Catholics have never read or even heard of this letter. "What I tell you from in darkness, speak in the light. What you hear in private, speak from the housetops" (Mt 10, 27). "Brothers and Sisters to Us" is a call to the wisdom from above that St. James preaches about in the second reading. "Wisdom from above...is first of all innocent. It is peaceable, lenient, docile, rich in sympathy and the kindly

deeds that are its fruits are impartial and sincere” (Jm 3, 18).

Living by that wisdom from above, the Church in the United States has made many contributions to the well-being of African-American people, especially in the areas of education, social services, health care, and the fight for social and economic justice. The Church has been a champion of the dignity of every person from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death. This has included an advocacy for the disproportionate number of poor, African-American males who are on death row. The church has been untiring in its defense of the permanence of marriage and the essential importance of strong, stable families. Most importantly, the Church has attempted to share its faith in Jesus Christ, who lived, loved, died, and rose from the dead for all people.

Regretfully, many of these contributions have gone unnoticed in African-American communities. A key reason for this is the fact that there is so little contact between most African-Americans and the Catholic Church. In a growing area like Phoenix, the African-American population is only about 5%. Many of these residents, like their counterparts around the nation, have never seen an African-American Catholic sister, brother, deacon, priest, or bishop. Not ever! If it is true that few Americans of European heritage have an in-depth appreciation of the African-American experience, it is equally true that few African-Americans have an in depth appreciation of the Catholic Church. When the late Auxiliary Bishop Joseph A. Francis of Newark, NJ was asked, with all seriousness, why there were so few African-American Catholics, he responded, with all seriousness. “If you knew what I knew, if you had experienced what I have experienced, you would not ask how can there be so few. You would ask. “How can there be so many?”

Almost ten years after “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” Pope John Paul II addressed the leaders of the African-American Catholic community at Xavier University on September 12, 1987. The Pontiff said: “While remaining faithful to her doctrine and discipline, the Church esteems and honors all cultures; she respects them in all of her evangelizing efforts among the various peoples...It is important to realize that there is no Black Church, no White Church, no American Church; but there is and must be in the one Church of Jesus Christ, a home for ...every culture and race.”

“There is and must be in the one Church of Jesus Christ, a home for every culture and race.” Each one of us must commit ourselves with renewed enthusiasm to making the Church of Jesus Christ a fully welcoming home. We can play our part by committing ourselves anew to service in Christ’s name. We are needed to serve our suffering neighbors in Haiti, to serve the NAACP’s vision of true equality for all Americans, to serve the goal of “Brothers and Sisters to Us” to purge our hearts and our Church of all forms of prejudice and racism, and, ultimately to the service of the gospel by proclaiming from the housetops what we have heard in private. All of us can serve.

As Dr. King himself taught us: “Everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t need to know Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory in thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

As we go up to the altar of the Lord for the Liturgy of the Eucharist, let us pray. Let us pray for hearts full of grace and souls generated by love! AMEN!