

JUNETEENTH



by Fr. Matthew Hawkins

This Sunday, June 19th, is significant in our parish. It is the solemnity of Corpus Christi (the Most Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ); it is Father's Day (a day when we draw upon the image of St. Joseph as our model for fatherhood and devotion to the family), and it is the day of the Juneteenth celebration (a day that commemorates the end of slavery in the United States). The convergence of these commemorative events, if properly understood, deepens our practice and understanding of the Catholic faith.

During the solemnity of Corpus Christi, we acknowledge how the Eucharist is at the center of the Christian life. Not only do we recognize that Christ transforms ordinary material, such as bread and wine, into the extraordinary "real presence" of Christ, but we also realize that Christ transforms ordinary people into his body. The transubstantiation of the bread and wine and the transformation of the church assembly is the significance of the solemnity of Corpus Christi. It is the source of the dignity of the human person.

Likewise, St. Joseph is our model for Father's Day even though he was not Jesus' biological father. The example of St. Joseph teaches us that fatherhood is not simply the act of procreation. Instead, the essence of fatherhood is to be present in a child's life and nurture that child to physical, mental, and spiritual maturity. To the extent that we have lost sight of this, our communities have disintegrated into chaos, which is the enemy of the dignity of the human person.

This Sunday, we celebrate Juneteenth. Juneteenth should have significance within the Catholic Church in the United States because it provides a unique opportunity to understand and teach about Catholic social thought. Moreover, it is a pivotal moment in American history because it emerged from the principle of human equality before God,

which we will celebrate during Independence Day two weeks from now. It is also the consequence of the lives lost to preserve the union during the Civil War that we commemorated on Memorial Day three weeks ago.

The abolition of slavery in the United States was a gradual process. While different forms of enslavement were common throughout the world in the 19th century, Christian principles elevated the abolition of slavery to the status of a moral imperative almost 1,000 years before the inception of the United States. Significantly, in the 5th century, St. Patrick argued the moral imperative to abolish enslavement in Ireland. Later, in the United States, the question of slavery led to a fierce debate that culminated in the Civil War in 1861. It took six months for news of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation to reach enslaved people in Texas. Slavery became illegal in the United States after ratifying the 13th and 14th amendments in 1865 and '68.

Core principles of Catholic social thought include the dignity of the human person, respect for human life from conception until natural death, the preferential protection of the poor and the vulnerable, the principle of solidarity, and the principle of human equality. The Church teaches that people must not be reduced to objects to be used and exploited. The dignity of the human person is derived from the realization that the image of God is imprinted on our souls.

There are two books that I highly recommend to learn more about Juneteenth. Both books were published last year. One is a piece of solid historical research, while the other is a memoir and reflection on the meaning of the holiday from the standpoint of Black American communities in Texas. Edward T. Cotham wrote an indispensable history titled *Juneteenth: The Story Behind the Celebration*. Annette Gordon-Reed provided an impressionistic memoir in her book: *On Juneteenth*. Both books will give readers a better understanding of the human dignity behind the holiday. Happy Juneteenth. Happy Father's Day. Happy *Corpus Christi*.

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