

June 23, 2020

In recent weeks, we have witnessed the vandalizing and toppling of statues around the country which depict Confederate leaders, Christopher Columbus, Saint Junipero Serra, Francis Scott Key, and anyone else deemed to be offensive to the vandals. Even a monument recognizing the service of the first all-volunteer Black regiment of the Union Army during the Civil War was defaced in Boston. Often, law enforcement officers have done nothing to stop this destruction. The magazine, *Popular Mechanics*, features a current article detailing how to destroy “a statue that you decide you no longer like,” utilizing science to do so. This dynamic reached another stage on June 22 when Shaun King, a Black activist, publicly encouraged the destruction of “white” statues and other artistic depictions of Jesus Christ, labeling them as forms of “white supremacy.”

As an avid reader of United States history, I know some of the torturous narrative of violence and oppression against both the Native peoples of this land and the African peoples brought here as slaves. In my opinion, the injustices suffered by these peoples over the course of centuries are two of the greatest moral failures of our country, with deep repercussions in our culture. We must study and know this history in order to transcend it, to learn from it and to commit ourselves to justice, equality, and solidarity because of it. At the same time, even the worst aspects of history should be remembered and kept before our eyes. Auschwitz remains open as both a memorial and a museum, so that humanity never forgets the horror of the Holocaust.

How illuminating and healing it would be if we had a national education effort to understand our history in its totality, have respectful discussion about the proper way to commemorate people and events, such as Christopher Columbus, the European colonization of the Americas, the tragic suffering of slavery, the Civil War, Confederate leaders, the Founding Fathers, and the evangelization of our continent and then make measured decisions about statues, buildings, and memorials.

If we allow the commemorative and visual history of our nation to be destroyed by random groups in the current moment of anger, how will we ever learn from that history? Does toppling and vandalizing a statue of George Washington because he owned slaves, really serve our country and our collective memory? Would it not be better to let the whole history of our country be on full display in all of its complexity, so that we can value the patrimony of our heritage and simultaneously critique the injustices and sins of the past? A statue of Christopher Columbus was erected in the North End of Boston by proud Italian-Americans in the 1920s as a sign of their ethnic heritage. Two weeks ago the statue was beheaded by vandals. A slap in the face to those who paid for it and placed it there for a noble purpose. Should certain statues be

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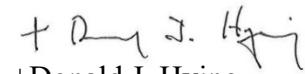
placed in museums or storage? Perhaps. Should we let a group of vandals make those decisions for us? No.

Concerning the destruction of “white” artistic depictions of Jesus, which Shaun King has called for, the principle of enculturation merits our reflection here. In the Catholic Church, every culture, country, ethnicity, and race has claimed Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary as their own. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Saint Juan Diego as a mestiza, African art depicts Jesus as Black, Asian depictions of the Blessed Mother, too, take on similarities of both bodily appearance and, often, cultural garb. In this context, are white representations of Christ and His Mother inherently signs of white supremacy? I think not. Because the Son of God became incarnate in our human flesh, does not all of humanity – every race, tribe, and tongue – have the spiritual ability to depict Him through the particular lens of their own culture?

In Her missionary outreach, some in the Church at times have mistakenly equated the fullness of Catholicism with European culture. We have learned over time, as have others, to approach a different culture with respect and humility, recognizing the inherently authentic human elements already present in each person and place. We attempt to maintain unity in that which is essential, and diversity in those things which are not. A robust proclamation of the Gospel will purify every culture of its negative and destructive elements, but will leave intact its beauty, goodness, and truth. Belief in Jesus as Our Lord and Savior only makes us more fully human and more deeply rooted in the worth of our respective culture and country.

In the face of Mr. King’s comments, as a shepherd of the Church, I cannot remain silent. I need to denounce such a call to violence and destruction. Our statues, pictures, stained-glass windows, churches, icons, and devotions are holy to us. They are sacramentals, blessed and sacred, visible expressions of the love of God, poured out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and made manifest in the Saints. They remind us of God, His love for us in Christ, and the nearness of the divine. The secular iconoclasm of the current moment will not bring reconciliation, peace, and healing. Such violence will only perpetuate the prejudice and hatred it ostensibly seeks to end. Religious freedom, given to man by God Himself, and guaranteed by our Constitution, allows us as Catholics to practice our faith, build our churches, pray in public, put up statues and crucifixes on our property, and serve the common good through a remarkable network of health care, schools, and social services. We must not surrender our religious liberty to the voices that seek the destruction of our public presence, the diminishing of our sacramental worship, and the denial of our belief in Jesus Christ as the savior of the world. Only the love of Christ can heal a wounded heart, not a vandalized piece of metal.

Sincerely in Christ,


+Donald J. Hying
Bishop of Madison