A Catholic moral theologian and former law enforcement officer from a midwestern culture seeped in racism, reflects on his own personal experience of white privilege / By TOBIAS WINRIGHT

White privilege – a confession

I FIRST MET Bryan Massingale, who wrote the memorable piece confronting America's commitment to white privilege in last week's *Tablet*, 25 years ago at a small conference of Catholic theologians and ethicists. Massingale was a young assistant professor of moral theology at Saint Francis Seminary in his home diocese of Milwaukee in Wisconsin; I was a graduate student studying moral theology at the University of Notre Dame.

We sat together over a meal. I immediately felt a rapport with him. Massingale was the first black Catholic theologian I had ever encountered. His presentation opened my eyes to "environmental racism". He pointed out that waste incinerators and landfills tend to be located in impoverished neighbourhoods where blacks and other people of colour reside, contributing to serious health problems.

Since then we have worked together on various boards and committees in the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society of America. In December 2014, in the wake of the police killing of Eric Garner and the deaths of other black persons in police custody, we collaborated on a joint statement on racial justice. It was signed by 456 Catholic theologians.

What I write now is certainly not the last word about white racism and the brutal killing of George Floyd. Nor is it simply a response to Massingale's article. As Bryan is a Catholic priest, I am making a confession – one that is public rather than private, and one obviously not under the seal. Before I can "check" my white privilege, as his article urged, I must *confess* it. In short, while I want to contribute to the solution, I am also still a part of the problem of white racism, supremacy, and privilege.

LIKE MASSINGALE, I will share a few vignettes. Like him, I am a Midwesterner. Unlike him, I did not live in a city such as Milwaukee. I was born in Hicksville, a small town in rural northwest Ohio, in a county with a population today of approximately 37,000 people, nearly 97 percent of them being white. I suspect that 55 years ago, when I was born, the percentage was even higher. I grew up on a farm. I never had a black neighbour, classmate, teacher, or priest. I remember when I was in a store in the nearest small city, Fort Wayne, Indiana, I saw a black boy, and I excitedly exclaimed to my parents, "I saw a ******!" I used one of the racist words that I heard regularly back then to refer to black people.

I did not feel hatred toward this black boy. I did not intend anything malicious toward him. But at the time I also told racist jokes (as well as sexist and homophobic ones). Many of my friends and family did, too. Racism was not something I learned from a teacher, but neither do I recall the Catholic nuns, who were assiduous in teaching me to be pro-life and to care for the environment, drumming into me that racism was morally repugnant. Perhaps my memory is faulty.

PHOTO: PA/AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN, JAY JANNER

Officers kneel outside police headquarters in Austin, Texas

AND RACISM was not something I witnessed in its more extreme forms. I did not know anyone who belonged to a white supremacist group such as the Ku Klux Klan. Indeed, my great-great-great grandfather James Winright fought as a member of an Indiana regiment against the Confederates during the Civil War, dying near its end in Virginia in 1865. And St Joseph's, the Catholic church in the village of Blakeslee, Ohio, where I had been baptised, was burned to the ground in March 1881, allegedly by a racist and anti-Catholic gang.

And yet I too was a racist. To turn the term "environmental racism" on its head, racism was elemental to my boyhood environment. If it is, as Jim Wallis has called it, America's "original sin" (though I think white racism towards blacks is connected with European colonialism and conquest, too), then it is not necessarily always conscious or volitional. It is also not only personal and individual, but it has become built into the institutions and systems of our society. Although baptism washed away my bondage to original sin, including presumably this one, racism remains, not only in this country and elsewhere, but also in me.

And regardless of my lack of personal involvement in slavery, Jim Crow, or segregation during this country's past, I benefit every day from that white supremacy. Although my paternal family left England to settle (occupy?) the New England colonies in the seventeenth century, and have been mostly blue-collar farmers and factory workers, the Wainwrights/Winrights have benefited handsomely from this white privilege.

Many of my relatives and friends with whom I grew up would deny this. They were, I am sure, disgusted by the sight of the police officer's knee pressing on the neck of George Floyd for nearly nine minutes; but they are more deeply disturbed by the Black Lives Matter protests. Part of this is due to their fears about demographic changes in the United States. Part of it is due to their concerns about their jobs. Part of it can be attributable to ignorance and lack of education. Part of it may be because of their dearth of personal experiences with black people. But benefiting from the sins of our ancestors while denying it, being silent about it, and failing to do anything about it, is still sin to be confessed (after all, we confess during Mass, "for what I have done and for what I have failed to do").

Another vignette: I am the first person in my immediate family to receive a university education. To do so, I first worked full-time in a maximum security jail in Florida, where my mother, three younger brothers and I had moved a few years earlier following my parents' divorce. My mother had become a police officer, and we worked for the same law enforcement agency. One day my fellow officers brought to my attention a black inmate who shared my surname. Although my direct ancestors had moved from Maryland to northern Indiana in the early nineteenth century, some of my ancestral relatives moved south into North Carolina, Florida, and Texas, and they had owned slaves.

I ALSO REMEMBER when one day another officer proudly displayed a flag and a thank you note from the government of South Africa, because he had written them a letter of support for apartheid (this was during the mid-1980s). His racism bothered me, but I did not say anything, which I now regret. Here is a curious thing, though: it was during my experience as a law enforcement officer that I first made friends with co-workers who were black. I also realised the disproportionate number of black persons who were incarcerated and brutalised by police, correctional officers, and the criminal justice system.

When I went to graduate school to study moral theology, I took a course in the history and theology of the black church. But when I published my first peer-reviewed article in

a scholarly journal on the use of force in policing, even though I highlighted the brutal beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers in 1991, I devoted little attention to racism. In later articles, I have criticised the militarization of the police, but until recently its racism has been peripheral. Of course, the two are related, as Radley Balko showed in *The Rise of the Warrior Cop*. The "war on drugs" and the "war against crime" during the 1970s and 1980s were in part about keeping blacks "in their place".

This leads me to my final vignette. A few years ago I was called to jury duty. The defendant was a black woman; the only evidence against her was the testimony of three white police officers. During the *voir dire*, the prosecutor declared, "Although there may be some bad apples among the police, most of them can be trusted." It was shortly after the police killings of black men in St Louis and nearby Ferguson. I responded: "Sometimes bad apples might be a symptom of a diseased tree." I was of course dismissed.

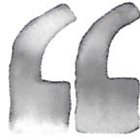
MUCH OF US policing has its roots in slave patrols. This has proved poisonous. Only radical reform – with the deployment of the moral imagination in every part of the process from deconstruction to construction (not merely reconstruction) – can hope to bring *just* policing to the US. There could be no better time to begin this task than now.

I see that I have begun to transition from confession to addressing the question with which Massingale concluded. What is the way forward? Bryan has called for solidarity, and today, with new urgency, I humbly report for duty. White Catholic theologians must not only listen to the voices of black people and black theologians, but try to stand where they stand. Two decades ago, black liberation theologian James H. Cone observed: "If one read only White Catholic theologians, one would hardly know that Blacks exist in America or had the capacity for thought about God." Since then, a new generation of Catholic theologians, including a few more (but not enough) who are black, has turned its attention to black theology and the blasphemy of racism, white privilege, white nationalism, and white supremacy, among them Maria Teresa Dàvila, Michael Jaycox, Alex Mikulich, Craig A. Ford Jr, Jeremy V. Cruz, and Anna Floerke Scheid. The black experience in America is not merely a footnote or an addendum to their teaching and scholarship,it is fundamental to it: they organise to change institutions, they are campaigners and educator-activists, participating in demonstrations, protests and marches.

We may stand before an abyss, but these men and women, like the courageous and eloquent Bryan Massingale, keep me from despair.

Tobias Winright is associate professor of theological ethics and health care ethics at Saint Louis University. He is the editor of the T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics (Bloomsbury/T&T Clark) and author of Serve and Protect: Selected Essays on Just Policing (Cascade).

Babette's Feast is one of the finest contemporary parables about the Eucharist I know



A creative way of celebrating the Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord, especially during lockdown, might be to re-watch *Babette's Feast*. This 1986 film is one of the finest contemporary parables about the Eucharist I know. While it can be equally read as a homage to an artist, the sacramental reading is a fascinating one.

Based on Karen Blixen's (writing as Isak Dinesen) novel of the same name, Babette, a French Catholic, is a Parisian chef who gets caught up in the riots in the French capital in 1871. Her husband and son are killed in the fighting. Babette is assisted to escape to Norway (Denmark in the film), where members of a strict Protestant sect take her into their remote village. The founder of the community has died, but his two daughters engage Babette as their cook. The mysterious woman assumes the nature of a servant. They have no idea who she is, or what has bought her to their home. Having been in the village for 14 years, Babette wins 10,000 francs in the Lottery, and asks the sisters to let her provide a feast in honour of what would have been their father and the Pastor's 100th birthday. She spends all her winnings on buying food and wine so that she can provide a banquet for the community who saved her life.

On the night of the meal the members of the starkly Protestant community are anxious about the food and wine they will be served. They have never had such rich fare before, and have never tasted alcohol. They decide to eat Babette's feast but to draw no attention to it, offering up their meal as reparation for sin. Also present at the feast is a local man who is now a general in the army. While he can't understand how the villagers can ignore the beauty of the meal, he notes that the only time he has had such fare was at the Café Anglais from the hands of Paris' most celebrated chef, a woman. Babette remains unseen throughout the dinner, but despite their resistance, her meal has a dramatic effect on the diners.

Akin to the secrecy of Jesus' identity in Mark's Gospel, Babette's full story is only gradually revealed, and even then not fully disclosed. Like Mary and Martha of Bethany, the sisters welcome their guest in her need and out of their Christian devotion. Labouring away in hiddenness, Babette comes into her own through powers beyond the world of the village: the lottery. Then, she can plan and execute the anniversary meal, the one she longed to share. She pours all she has into the meal. This last point is worth amplifying. The sisters who've come to rely on her expect that with her newfound fortune Babette will abandon them. Having become poor, however, she remains faithful to them until the end. Babette may not give her physical life for her people, but dies to her old life and is reborn in the nature of a slave.

The feast is one of the great metaphors Jesus used to describe his kingdom, where the best of everything is provided for the rich and poor alike. But it is the effect of this meal that most reveals its nature. There are twelve diners around the table and most of them do not understand the significance of the meal. Only one diner, the general (a priest for the unseen host?), can interpret the signs and fully appreciate the fare placed before them. At this meal the truth is told, forgiveness is granted and a more unified community emerges.

Channelling Babette, one of my professors of liturgy once told our class: "If you can't, or don't know how to host a dinner party, you have no right to preside at the Eucharist." Though the analogy can be taken too far, he was making the point that, in Christ's name, the presider should prepare the space, attend to all the details in advance, create a hospitable environment, welcome the assembly, enable them to hear the story and share their own, create a community from the congregating individuals and send them out fed, refreshed and encouraged

Whether we interpret Babette as an artist or a Christ figure, this film narrates how a meal can sometimes transform our lives. Christians hold that the Eucharistic meal, from which we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, both changes lives here and now, and prefigures the eternal banquet to come. That why "it's the Mass that matters" – then, now and for eternity to come.

Richard Leonard SJ is the author of Hatch, Match and Dispatch: A Catholic Guide to Sacraments (Paulist Press).