Walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice

- Universal Apostolic Preference
As we remember the Black lives that have been lost to state-sanctioned assault and violence, I’m reminded that, as a Black mother and as a Black leader, there is much work needed to keep my children safe. I do this as the necessary safeguard to protect their futures as well as to keep the children of all Black parents safe so they, too, will realize hope-filled futures. As such, I grieve even as I write this piece to help others understand our collective duty to uncover and dismantle systemic racism to protect and safeguard Black lives.

In the past few weeks and months, white colleagues and friends have asked the question, “Mary, what do I do?” or, “Mary, what should we do now?” These prompts led me to think about what is the purpose of redemption, how does reconciliation work, and how do we move from our desolation to spaces of consolation?

As I contemplated these things, I thought of Amy Cooper — a white woman whose verbal attack on a Black man in New York’s Central Park went viral in the spring of 2020. Her display of white privilege weaponized against the man she attacked provided a real-life example of whiteness and how white women use their racialized power against Black people in America.

Redemption, reconciliation, and Amy Cooper brought me back to the Altar Call.

Within Black churches, after the sermon, the minister asks all in attendance to respond to the message, to come into the fold of righteousness of God’s love and redemption and the community’s safeguards of security and belonging.

The Altar Call is an invitation into the beloved church community as a sanctuary and place where healing, hope, and redemption occur. It’s a calling into the fold — a blanket of love where people are supported, build meaningful relationships, and are connected to others, a place where people get the help they need to learn and grow, a home to gather, reconcile, and forgive for a higher purpose.

I think there are three kinds of people who answer the Altar Call:

**The Ready Repentant.** When they arrived at church, when they woke up that morning, when they assessed the state of their life, the Ready Repentant knew exactly what they wanted next for their lives. As soon as the sermon is finished and the invitational song begins, they jump up from their seats, first to head down the aisle toward the altar. They come running as fast as they can. “I know I need to do better,” they say. “I just want to be a better person. I am seeking the community’s help and support.”

**The Reluctant Repentant.** These people are ready, yet reluctant. In anticipation of the reluctant people, music continues and the minister will wait for those who are reluctant to come forward. So the choir continues, the minister may continue to preach, but the invitational time is still open. And, sure enough, after enough time passes, here come the reluctant ones. They rise up and begin to make their way to the altar. There is much encouragement that happens when reluctant ones come to the altar because the church community already knows who they are and the
The church knows they need that encouragement. Everyone starts clapping and hugging them — they knew, and so did everyone else, that the beloved community needs them as much as they need the beloved community. Reluctant ones sometimes end up being some of the best soldiers for righteousness.

The Holdout Unrepentant. These are the tough ones. They don’t want to change their lives. They may see the value of sharing in the beloved community; but they aren’t willing to change their behaviors. They don’t want to change their attitudes, and they are comfortable with their practices. They will not give up the privilege they have to maintain their choices, their lifestyle, their comfort, their power. So they forego the opportunity to redeem themselves altogether. They will not give up what they see as theirs to have — they want to keep things just the way they are. For years, they will outright refuse to accept the opportunity to live within the parameters and demands of the Beloved Community.

This is an Altar Call moment for white people in the United States.

This is an Altar Call moment for white people in Jesuit higher education.

This is an Altar Call moment when white friends and neighbors and colleagues are being asked to commit to do the internal work, to reflect on their whiteness, so they might be redeemed.

To Those who are Ready Repentants: You are the disciples for racial justice and reconciliation on our campuses. To the ones who are currently doing the work of racial justice, I thank God for you as an ally in how you stand up on issues that matter even when it’s challenging for you to do so. Thank you, and step it up more. Ready disciples were made for racial justice and reconciliation work — you know who you are, and we know who you are.

To those who are Ready/Reluctant Repentant: We got you. We have the capacity to provide support, resources, education and community to help you through the difficult process of deconstructing whiteness and helping you to unlearn things that have harmed you, your friends, Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and society.

To those who are a Holdout Unrepentant: You maintain your position on our campuses, you have more power than most, and you have privilege that protects you in the form of relationships with trustees, years of service, position, and status on campus. You are holding back the Beloved Community by keeping things status quo in the name of tradition, security, and liability. You know who you are and so does the rest of the community. More important, God knows. Holdouts will keep us from fulfilling our mission of justice and reconciliation.

This invitation carries with it a series of questions for everyone called to come to the altar. People of color, transgender and gender-non-conforming people, undocumented immigrants, persons with disabilities, and all marginalized members of the Jesuit community are demanding, will you see us? Will you hear our concerns? What will be your response?

The answer to these questions relies upon an ability to fulfill this preferential option that is guided by the principle of equity for a repentant engagement. Do we have the capacities to redeem ourselves through giving preferential tenderness to those who rightfully demand more of us?

How far Jesuit higher education can go on our road to redemption will depend on how our dominant colleagues and friends respond to this monu-
mental time of white supremacy with all of its accompanying harm and atrocities. Repentance, redemption, and critical allyship are the tools we have within our reach to repair the harm of racial injustice and lead us to a place of healing and reconciliation.

How long it takes for the collective Ignatian community to become the Beloved Community will depend on our ability to hold people accountable — including the ones who are holding out and who maintain the status quo through power, privilege, and oppression.

How deep Jesuit higher education goes to reconcile ourselves with the legacies of anti-Black racism and white institutional conditioning depends on how long it takes for white colleagues to see themselves in Amy Cooper, and to be honest with themselves about their own complicity in racial injustice.

Racial justice and reconciliation depends on the internal reflective work our dominant colleagues will engage in to examine their part in racial injustice. Racially just institutions depend on repentance of unconscious and hidden biases and unseen supremacist behaviors.

A Redemptive Framework for Anti-Black Racism

In the Jewish tradition, the Hebrew word teshuva is translated as “returning.” As humans, we make mistakes, but the idea of repentance is that we return to the path of righteousness. Teshuva is a way back, a process that can restore ourselves with one another. To ensure the fulfillment of the Universal Apostolic Preference of walking with the poor, the excluded, the outcasts of the world as an act of reconciliation and justice, I would like to offer a reparational framework for racial justice and reconciliation informed by teshuva for Jesuit universities and social works.

Recognizing harm and injury. Recognition comes in the form of admission and acknowledgement of institutional harm to impacted persons and communities through repentance of the harm. This step is to rebuild righteous relationships with marginalized persons and communities. Recognizing and admitting that you have made mistakes with Black students is essential.

Expressing regret and remorse by asking for forgiveness. This step expresses feelings of shame, guilt, and being able to sit with the discomfort in the harm one has caused. The stain of anti-Black racism is part of the fabric of our institutions and asking for forgiveness is critical.

Desisting from the sin of anti-Black racism. This step examines attitudes, behaviors, institutional practices and procedures, regardless of whether intentional or unintentional, that have led to such institutionalized racism that causes harm to Black students, faculty, alumni, and staff.

Making restitution. Go back to the individuals in the community who have been harmed and make restitution of the damages to the injured in the forms of financial and relational restitution and the redistribution of privileges, power, and resources.

Vowing not to repeat the misdeeds that caused the original harm. Commit to changing one’s actions, attitudes, and behavior to integrate this reparational approach in institutional processes that adopt antiracism and center the needs and experiences of BIPOC, trans* and gender non-conforming community members, immigrants, and persons with disabilities. When faced with similar situations or decisions, an institution or individual representatives will make different choices as an act to make room for a new beginning. Rebuild our institutional cultures with empathy, accountability, and liberation.

In closing, my faith gives me hope that we can build healing institutional cultures through the redemptive framework of teshuva. Reconciliation requires both accountability and liberation. This will occur when we address anti-Black racism and racial injustice on our campuses. In the days, months, and years ahead, may we reclaim our Ignatian witness with an antiracist, redemptive framework and reflection that will heal our wounds and help us move forward in our commitment to racial justice.

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