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Violenza sacra

2. Guerra santa, sacrificio e martirio in età contemporanea

a cura di Maria Paiano

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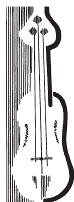

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Matteo Caponi

Black Martyrs, Past and Present: Racial Violence, Christian Imagination, Secular Meanings*

1. *The ghost of George Floyd*

In June 2020, in the wake of the massive protests resulting from the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other top Democrats including members of the Congressional Black Caucus presented a far-reaching bill called *Justice in Policing Act*, aimed at increasing accountability for law enforcement and in particular banning chokeholds.[1] The unveiling of the reform bill staged a definitely symbolic action. The Democratic lawmakers, wearing Kente scarves in solidarity with African-descended people and in honor of African heritage, took the knee at the Capitol for 8 minutes and 46 seconds – the same amount of time Chauvin pressed on Floyd's neck. During the related press conference, Pelosi claimed that «the martyrdom of George Floyd gave the American experience a moment of national anguish». His tragic end could be interpreted as an outcome of systemic racism and police brutality, but was also the spark of «a movement of national action» across the country, peacefully demanding «an end to injustice».[2]

* This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 794780.

1. About the bill, introduced in the House of Representatives on June 8, 2020, see *H.R.7120. George Floyd Justice in Policing Act of 2020*, https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/7120. All online sources were accessed in December 2021.

2. An excerpt of Pelosi's speech is available on the «Washington Post» YouTube Channel: *Pelosi Unveils Policing Overhaul after 'Martyrdom' of George Floyd* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=405Kt-7bnOI). See also Charles M. Blow, *The Civil Rights Act of 2020*, in «The New York Times» («NYT»), June 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/opinion/police-brutality-protests-legislation.html.

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This was not the last time Speaker Pelosi used the imagery of martyrdom to describe Floyd's murder and in general the death of black people at the hands of white police officers. In a very controversial speech following Chauvin's sentencing to twenty-two and a half years, the Democratic leader thanked Floyd for having sacrificed his life «for justice».[3] In doing so, she faced a backlash from both the right and the left: the former accusing her of disgracefully exploiting a tragic event for political purposes; the latter reproaching her for referring to a sacred and voluntary act, equal to a testament of faith. This was not the case at all. Floyd did not deliberately choose to die. He did not "offer" his own life for a greater cause. He was not "bearing testimony", accepting his death as a warning for all and a service to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Floyd was killed in a pointless, unnecessary way, while begging for mercy; he was yet another victim of institutional violence and misconduct fed by antiblack prejudice.[4]

The narrative of murdered blacks as martyrs to racial justice is a powerful device, though entailing many difficulties, misleading generalizations and trivializations. Paradoxically, by sacralizing these deaths, a number of opinion makers, political figures, intellectuals and general media who still recognize themselves in a wide, ordinary antiracist sensibility have been giving sense to needless crimes, turning them into useful evils, able to redeem society from the «sin of white supremacy»[5] and foster black liberation. The call for public atonement not only characterizes the debate about reparations for chattel slavery; it also typifies the wide circulation of the trope of black martyrdom. By assuming white supremacy as a structural system of privilege whereby the lighter skinned are placed center stage whereas the dark skinned are inevitably devaluated, antiblack racism has often been conceived as an original guilt that white people should recognize and "confess", and ultimately requires a religious compensation so as to heal social unrest and racial boundaries. Mourning has been described as

3. Sewell Chan, *Nancy Pelosi's Gratitude, and the Problem with Black Martyrdom*, in «Los Angeles Times», April 20, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-04-20/george-floyd-nancy-pelosi.

4. It goes without saying that the birth of the BLM movement dating back to 2013 had its origins in a murder (Trayvon Martin's one). See Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter. A Brief History of an Idea*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

5. A theological survey of that issue in Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy. Christianity, Racism, and Religious Diversity in America*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Book, 2017.

an inspirational step for recovery: Floyd's passing – understood both in its Christian, reconciliatory "rest in peace" version and in the militant "rest in power" alternative – has been thought to be a cathartic passage of renewal for the whole country.

The reference to black martyrdom, framing the killing of African Americans in a "war on crime" undertaken by militarized police against impoverished black communities, is part of a long history of political violence, whose immediate past lies in the post-civil rights explosion of black rebellion opposing unequal social order.[6] In this contribution, however, I assume that the radical facet of such a pattern, validating violent opposition to white authority in revolutionary or terroristic terms, played a marginal role in directing collective imagery and public opinion. In a 1944 article on the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s magazine «The Crisis», *Negro Martyrs Are Needed*, Chester B. Himes disputed the submissive characterization of black martyrdom, advocating the strategy of a defensive, organized, revolutionary violence so as to make the United States safer for blacks. In addition to reflecting the rhetoric of the antifascist Popular Front, Himes's heroic model of martyr-fighter was a call to arms against white supremacy and white police, written in the incendiary aftermath of racial riots in Harlem and Detroit: «Martyrs are needed to create incidents. Incidents are needed to create revolutions. Revolutions are needed to create progress».[7] But despite being later appropriated by Black Power, this rationale linking masculinity, armed self-sacrifice and racial justice failed to become dominant in the African American imagination, as it is primarily couched in a victimization register.

This martyrial aspect is not a relic from the past. It is still alive today. Murders of black people have been widely experienced both as a tragedy and a collective opportunity for awareness, moral uplift, and spiritual unity against internal conflicts undermining national cohesion. Methodist theologian Adam Ployd, for instance, has defended «an approach to martyrdom that goes beyond the stories of the Roman Empire», and a reflection on the «state-sanctioned killing within our own empire». Enlarging upon St. Au-

6. Elizabeth Hinton, *America on Fire. The Untold History of Police Violence and Black Rebellion since the 1960s*, New York, Liveright, 2021.

7. Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation. A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 139.

gustine's *non poena sed causa* formula – "not the penalty but the cause", that is to say that the reason why one suffered, and not simply the death, matters in terms of martyrdom – Ployd ascribed to blacks killed by police as not being actively positive witnesses, but passively neutral witnesses testifying «a particular social evil».[8] Antiracist "polite protest" has at various times done the same, by implementing the cult of the dead, and making it a core element of a non-divisive, reconciliatory civil religion against racism. In the mind of Christians and Roman Catholics like Pelosi, the «martyrdom of George Floyd» served as «a prayerful» and «transformative moment» which Americans «have a responsibility to take advantage of».[9] It has been noted that the incident of Minneapolis «reignited a movement», being the catalyst of the most important mass mobilization in the United States since the 1960s civil rights era.[10] It is also true that such a protest has been backed by an impressive religious-like memorialization of the 46-year-old black man, who was transformed into a worldwide, suffering, saintly icon. Public mourning for racial violence, as well as the connection between individual losses and political activism, which is so noteworthy in BLM, places itself in a framework which is not embedded in church institutions but at the same time incorporates religious imagery and practices.[11]

Just consider the George Floyd Memorial in Minneapolis: a grassroots initiative which has been developed at the site where Floyd «was lynched», and is currently maintained by a self-organizing network as a «space for art and mourning, sustenance (literal and spiritual) and safety, grieving and gathering, resources and resistance». The memorial hosts several «expressions of pain and hope as offerings», such as «street art, drawings by children, protest songs, rocks, letters, paintings, and flowers».[12] Particularly meaningful are the murals immortalizing Floyd in different guises. The one painted in Minneapolis near where the killing took place, setting his face at

8. Adam Ployd, *What Makes a Martyr? The Movement for Black Lives and the Power of Rhetoric Old and New*, in «Journal of Ecumenical Studies», 55/1 (2020), pp. 33-45.

9. *Transcript of Pelosi Interview on MSNBC Live with Craig Melvin*, June 8, 2020, https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/6820-0.

10. Audra D.S. Burch, Amy Harmon, Sabrina Tavernise, Emily Badger, *A Year of Protest and Reform. What Now for Racial Justice?*, in «NYT», April 21, 2021, p. A1.

11. David W. McIvor, *Mourning in America. Race and the Politics of Loss*, Ithaca (NY)-London, Cornell University Press, 2016.

12. Quotations are taken from the official website: https://www.georgefloydglobalmemorial.org/.

the center of a sunflower with the inscription «I can breathe now», has assumed the function of a secular shrine and a site of pilgrimage. This takes on a specific value in the BLM symbolism permeating the site. The "Say Their Names Cemetery" located a block north displays, for instance, about 150 headstones with the names of black Americans killed by police, each of them bearing the Black Power symbol of the raised, clenched fist. Such a memorialization is indicative of the secular-religious nature of the BLM movement, which is one of the most debated points by some churchmen and conservative commentators arguing that BLM antiracism is a pseudo-, substitutional religion grounded in the dogma of black victimization («if you're white, you're guilty»), distracting people from activism in favor of passivism, or essentially promoting an antiwhite, politically correct sentiment determined to wipe out any influence of Western culture, including Judeo-Christian values. "Woke" antiracism would embody a profoundly religious-sectarian movement with its own saints, martyrs, and unfaithful to be excommunicated or "canceled".[13]

Prominent members of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy have supported this interpretation. A recent, topical example was given by the Archbishop of Los Angeles and president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), José H. Gómez. In a speech that he tweeted under the title *Reflections on the Church and America's New Religions* (November 4, 2021), Gómez frontally attacked the «new social justice movements», including antiracist ones, adopting the «wokeness» label which is usually employed by right-wing media as a term to dismiss social activism. Furthermore, the USCCB leader traced back «identity politics» to secularization, meaning Marxism and de-Christianization, and contended that it was «important for the Church to understand and engage these new movements – not on social or political terms, but as dangerous substitutes for true religion», that is to say as «political religions» denying «the human person» and causing intolerance and social division.[14] Black Catholic activists and

13. See John McWhorter, *Woke Racism. How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, New York, Portfolio-Penguin, 2021 and Pierre-André Taguieff, *L'imposture décoloniale. Science imaginaire et pseudo-antiracisme*, Paris, Éditions de l'Observatoire/Humensis, 2020. For a Catholic reply to these arguments, sympathetic to the BLM agenda, see Olga Segura, *Birth of a Movement. Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2021.

14. José H. Gomez, *Reflections on the Church and America's New Religions. Address delivered by video to Congress of Catholics and Public Life, Madrid, Spain*, November

scholars responded by emphasizing that they advocated BLM precisely because of their allegiance to the Christian faith, and not because they were against it.[15] Looking beyond this controversy, we should actually analyze the sacralization of Black victims as a cultural phenomenon shaped by the ambivalent relationship between Christianity and antiracism.[16] The promoters of the Floyd Memorial in Minneapolis clarified that «the people are more sacred than the memorial itself». Even more importantly, despite the secularity of the BLM movement, which is often associated with materialism and a Marxist background, Christian popular language pervades its narratives and iconography of mourning. This is evident in Floyd's holy depictions as a traditional saint with a halo (Los Angeles, U.S.), an angel (Houston, U.S.), or a modern, revolutionary saint along with Lenin, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Angela Davis (in the the mural by street artist Jorit *Time to Change the World*, Naples, Italy).[17]

2. *Sacred icons and antiracist liturgies*

Floyd's sacred representations have been embraced and reworked by Christian churches too, as evidence of a complex mixture of the religious and profane. A typical example is the sacred painting *Mama* by St. Louis-based artist and iconographer Kelly Latimore (picture 1). Copies of that work – representing a Black *pietà* in which Jesus resembles George Floyd – have «march[ed] in the streets» during the BLM demonstrations in cities across the United States and as a result have reached popularity. Latimore's socially committed religious art has reinvented the style of the Eastern Orthodox Church iconography by portraying «Christ incarnated

4, 2021, https://archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions.

15. Brian Fraga, *Black Catholics Respond with Dismay as Gomez Calls Protests 'Pseudo-religions'*, in «National Catholic Reporter», November 5, 2021, https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/black-catholics-respond-dismay-gomez-calls-protests-pseudo-religions.

16. *Race, Religion, and Black Lives Matter. Essays on a Moment and a Movement*, eds. Christopher Cameron and Philip Luke Sinitiere, Nashville (TN), Vanderbilt University Press, 2021.

17. Jonathan Jones, Mee-Lai Stone, *Ghost, Angel, Martyr: The Brutal Brilliance of George Floyd Murals from Syria to Belfast*, in «The Guardian», June 5, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/jun/05/george-floyd-murals-worldwide-street-artists.

as marginalized people of color», or painting modern-day exemplars of holiness who have been involved in black liberation and racial equality such as Dr. King or Frederick Douglass.[18] Through the association with the Passion and death of Jesus, even if «George Floyd was certainly not Jesus in any literal sense», it was easy to argue that Floyd «was/is a martyr, and martyrs inevitably remind us of Christ».[19] The timing of the Chauvin trial, close to Easter 2021, set some suggestive similarities in media and popular opinion. The Claretian magazine «U.S. Catholic» dealt with the «passion of George Floyd» questioning how «the unjust crucifixion of Jesus teaches us about how Black bodies are treated», and suggested a comparison between the death of Jesus and Floyd's death by suffocation for a presumed $20 crime. Images such as *Mama* were essentially conceived as a way to mourn Floyd. However, they aimed at describing the «passion of Black Americans unfolding in city streets, in prison, and in court rooms». The article's author, Jesuit Patrick Saint-Jean, also proposed a linkage to which I will return between «the cross and the lynching tree» – to quote black liberation theologian James H. Cone[20] –, by connecting the modern-day Passion of blacks killed by police officers with past antiblack atrocities in the American South.[21] This is a theme claimed by many BLM activists and supporters appropriating the memory of white mob violence and arguing that police killings of African Americans equate modern-day lynching.

18. Robert Lowes, *Seeing God in plain sight*, in «The Christian Century», 138/9 (2021), pp. 30-33 [May 5]. Latimore has achieved notoriety in liberal Catholic audiences, although he is Episcopalian, after his icon *La Sagrada Familia* – showing the Flight into Egypt with the Holy Family depicted as Latin American migrants – was used as the cover art for the collection of writings by Pope Francis, *A Stranger and You Welcomed Me. A Call to Mercy and Solidarity with Migrants and Refugees*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2018.

19. Joshua Gane, *George Floyd: A Martyr of the Digital Age*, April 6, 2021, https://joshgane-7339.medium.com/george-floyd-a-martyr-of-the-digital-age-ac640c05f9f: «Easter and Derek Chauvin trial intersect in 2021».

20. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2011.

21. Patrick Saint-Jean, *The Passion of George Floyd*, in «U.S. Catholic», April 6, 2021, https://uscatholic.org/articles/202104/the-passion-of-george-floyd/. The author is a Jesuit, psychologist and antiracist activist, supporting Critical Race Theory as a «seeking-truth» tool. His article readapted a chapter of his book *The Spiritual Work of Racial Justice. A Month of Meditation with Ignatius of Loyola*, Vestal (NY), Anamchara Books, 2021 (week 3, day 7). The title of Latimore's icon – *Mama* – is a reference to Floyd's last words («I can't breathe […] I can't move mama»), often compared to Jesus's words to the Virgin Mary.

Latimore's icon also captures the in-depth theme of the Black Christ: a counter-discourse which emerged in contrast to the white Jesus icon since the 19th century, and became a tenet of Black theology as a symbol of Christ's identification with black Americans in as much as they are more likely to be oppressed, harassed, discriminated against, or subjected to violence.[22] Even if BLM developed outside the organizing networks of black churches and did not find its moral legitimacy in religion, the allegorical system of murdered blacks as imitations of Jesus crucified displayed a strong emotional power and managed to influence churchmen too. While Latimore advertised his work by claiming that many prayers had been going into it, and that he would donate all the profits to the local St. Louis BLM group, conservative Catholic commentators vigorously contested the *de facto* canonization of a drug-addicted, common criminal. Anti-abortion activist Abby Johnson tweeted in reference to *Mama*'s Christological/ martyrological pattern: the Catholic Church «is burning» as «liberal Catholics continue to throw matches on Her with sacrilegious nonsense like this».[23]

The target of polemic were a few prominent Christians who supported BLM by making Floyd a modern Christian martyr of white supremacy, and his murder a call to fight white racism. One of them was Father James Martin, renowned for his liberal views and commitment to pastoral care for the LGBTQ+ community. Martin juxtaposed a photo of Floyd and the cover image of the foundational book by African-American Episcopal theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, which developed a Black theology of liberation by focusing on racial oppression in an intersectional way concerning gender, class, and sexual discrimination. The influential Jesuit and commentator wrote that

> After being brutalized and humiliated by civic authorities, and being pushed to the ground as a crowd watched, this innocent man was killed ultimately by asphyxiation, not by a loss of blood, and in his final moments, he cried out for a drink of water and spoke to his mother.[24]

22. Edward J. Blum, Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ. The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, Chapel Hill (NC), The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

23. Elizabeth Bruenig, *'Racism Makes a Liar of God'*, in «NYT», August 9, 2020, p. SR4.

24. The "tweet" by James Martin was dated June 1, 2020 (https://twitter.com/JamesMartinSJ/status/1267570417419550726?s=20). See Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ. 25th Anniversary Edition*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2019 (1st edition 1994).

Martin went even further in a response to President Donald Trump, who hailed new statistics about employment and remarked on «a great day» for people like Floyd too.[25] The Jesuit argued that this was not «a great day for #GeorgeFloyd, who only wanted to breathe»: «May Mr. Floyd pray for us in heaven, forgive us for the violence we did to him, and for the disgraceful lack of sorrow, mourning and remorse shown here», was his supplication.[26] These words are not obvious. They should be taken seriously, as they suggest the belief that black Americans killed by the police, such as Floyd, enjoy eternal life by virtue of the injustice suffered and their being victims of violence. The *similitudinarium martyrium* is here related not to the faithfulness to religious truth or other worldly societal values such as justice, but simply to a condition of suffering that mimics Christ's Passion. From Jesus to the martyrs following him, the core of Christian martyrdom has been the experience of being victimized by the world's violence.[27] However, this sacrificial pattern has to be considered, also from a Catholic viewpoint, alongside the de-politicized figure of the victim who has become omnipresent in post-ideological, contemporary mass culture and globalized collective memory.[28]

Above all, the painting *Mama* carrying the theology of Christ-like black martyrdom has not just been a subject for public debate and political struggle. It has become a sacred image in a narrow sense, being venerated and received in sites of worship. In August 2020, the original icon created by Latimore was installed at the Episcopal Church of Holy Communion in St. Louis, MO. The blessing of the icon «in honor and remembrance of Holy Mary mother of God» was associated with the prayer that God «grant all who come to pray with this image be reminded of the fierce and mothering love which you have for all your creatures». Under the *Magni-*

25. Katie Rogers, *President Says Job Report Makes 'a Great Day' for Floyd*, in «NYT», June 6, 2020, p. A16.

26. Tweet dated June 5, 2021: https://twitter.com/jamesmartinsj/status/12689632248-98207750. Stephen Vrazel, pastor of St. Vincent de Paul parish in Mobile, AL, replied to Johnson in this way: «This icon portrays Jesus as George Floyd, which is basically Matthew 25. Yeah, it takes artistic license, but it's not sacrilege at all», tweet dated June 29, 2020: https://twitter.com/keytarcatholic/status/1277653652602269696.

27. M.D. Lundberg, *Christian Martyrdom and Christian Violence. On Suffering and Wielding the Sword*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.

28. About the rise of the «age of the victim» in contemporary age, see Henry Rousso, *Face au passé. Essai sur la mémoire contemporaine*, Paris, Belin, 2016.

ficat (Luke 1:46-55), «Mary dared to imagine a world ruled by justice and love», where the lowly are lifted up and the mighty cast down from their thrones. The effect of these words is a sort of de-racialization, as the issue of blackness is passed over in silence.[29]

A copy of *Mama* was unveiled a few months later outside the Mary Mirror of Justice Chapel located at the School of Law of the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC. During the ceremony, a call and response prayer titled *Deliver us from the evils of racism, oh Lord!*, was read. Such a plea complied to the antiracist liturgies promoted by the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism of the USCCB after the white nationalist rally of Charlottesville in 2017. However, it also moved beyond the "official" and cautious *Prayer to Overcome Racism* proposed by the USCCB – and originally published in *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the 2018 collective pastoral letter against racism. If this last prayer adopted a reductionist definition of racism in terms of «prejudice and animosity» infecting «minds or hearts» (a sentiment which should be «replaced with a love that respects the dignity of each person»),[30] the prayer that was said in front of *Mama* embraced some watchwords of Critical Race Theory (CRT) against the classic Race Relations paradigm. The text presented racism as an ordinary and structural phenomenon, that is a revelation of the deep nature of American/Western societies, and not as a mere aberration of mind; it used the concept of "cultural appropriation"; finally, it underlined the inadequacy of a mere "non racist" attitude.

> We hear the words of prejudice, fear, and anger in our communities,
> We see acts of discrimination and bloodshed in our streets,
> We cry out to you, oh Lord, to deliver us from the evils of racism
> That cause great pain and anguish dividing our nation.
> Deliver us from the evil of active racism,
> the outspoken language of hate,
> the visible acts of violence,
> the clear class to divide and destroy.
>
> *Deliver us from the evils of racism, oh Lord!*

29. See the post *New Home for Icon "Mama"*, August 16, 2020, on https://kellylatimoreicons.com/blogs/news/new-home-for-icon-mama and *Morning Prayer for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2020*, https://youtu.be/rYyDeh3x6aM.

30. *Prayer to Overcome Racism*, https://www.usccb.org/resources/prayer-overcome-racism-0.

Deliver us from the evil of passive racism,
The attitudes and the actions that allow racism to continue to exist,
Because too many people say nothing and do nothing
To stop active racism.

Deliver us from the evils of racism, oh Lord!

Deliver us from the evil of systemic racism,
The biases that have long been a part of so many systems
In education, housing, health care, jobs,
and in our courts and penal structures,
creating disadvantages that remain for generations.

Deliver us from the evils of racism, oh Lord!

Deliver us from the evil of cultural racism,
From attitudes of superiority and privilege,
From stereotyping and devaluing a culture,
Even as we appropriate cultural expressions of those different from us
Without sensitivity or concern.

Deliver us from the evils of racism, oh Lord!

In Your mercy, oh God, deliver us from the evils of racism
So our communities can be renewed
By the rejection of all prejudice, all violence […].
Amen.[31]

The use of *Mama* as sacramental in all respects – i.e., an object blessed for the request of spiritual graces and temporal benefits – gave strength to this antiracist liturgical action. Despite this, the associated prayer's contents remained ambiguous. First of all, the text sidesteps the white racial frame, that is naming racism as a white problem in a society where power

31. *Catholic Law Welcomes the Iconography of Kelly Latimore's "Mama"*, March 3, 2021: https://www.law.edu/news-and-events/2021/03/2021-0303-blessing-of-the-icon.html. Not even a year later, the painting went missing after being targeted by *The Daily Signal* – a website owned by the Heritage Foundation – as a symptom of the liberalization and secularization of the campus. A group of students had petitioned for the icon's removal considering it blasphemous. Both Latimore and the Catholic University of America received offensive comments, and Latimore death threats too. See Jack Jenkins, '*George Floyd' pieta stolen after artist receives death threats*, in «Religion News Service», November 26, 2021, https://religionnews.com/2021/11/26/painting-seen-to-depict-jesus-as-george-floyd-stolen-artist-receives-death-threats/.

is mostly held by white people. Moreover, the term "evil" does not necessarily equate "sin" as an immoral act representing a violation of divine law and requiring repentance and atonement in order to be reintegrated in ecclesial communion. This variation reflects the uncertainties of the Catholic teaching too. The first time American bishops labelled racism a «sin» dates back to *Brother and Sisters to Us*, a 1979 collective pastoral letter followed after much delay by the first Vatican document entirely devoted to the issue of racism: the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission's text *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society* (1988).[32] In a speech after Floyd's killing, for instance, Pope Francis joined the Church in Saint Paul and Minneapolis «in praying for the repose of the soul of George Floyd and of all those others who have lost their lives as a result of the sin of racism».[33] While Bergoglio did not mention the death of the black man as a martyrdom or a sacrificial expiation, rather offering prayers of suffrage for his soul, a number of Catholic leaders and opinion makers connected the cliché of the «sin of racism», sometimes declined in the version of «systemic racism», with the idea that Floyd's death was a "useful" sacrifice, able to purge American society of the faults of anti-black discrimination, and at the same time prevent violent, divisive, or supposed self-destructive mass protests.[34]

The statement by U.S. Bishops' President, Archbishop Gómez, was pretty illustrative of a redemptive/accommodationist tendency according to which «We should not let it be said that George Floyd died for no reason. We should honor the sacrifice of his life by removing racism and hate from our hearts and renewing our commitment to fulfill our nation's sacred promise – to be a beloved community of life, liberty, and equality for all» – to quote Dr. King's nonviolent and inclusive vision which called for a white-black collaboration transcending identity politics.[35] In honoring

32. See B.N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2010.

33. *Pope Francis General Audience. Library of the Apostolic Palace*, June 3, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200603_udienza-generale.html.

34. *USCCB and (Arch)Diocesan Statements on the Death of George Floyd and National Protests*, in https://www.usccb.org/usccb-and-archdiocesan-statements-death-george-floyd-and-national-protests.

35. *Archbishop Gomez Statement on the Death of George Floyd*, June 1, 2020, https://cacatholic.org/article/archbishop-gomez-statement-death-george-floyd.

Floyd on the day of his burial, Gómez therefore urged that Catholics celebrate Masses in his memory and pray for the repose of his soul. He also invoked a colorblind image of God who «does not see black or white. God sees only his children. And he loves each one of us, no matter what the color of our skin is».[36] Religious services in memory of Floyd became often opportunities for unity and peace, aimed at ending «civil discord».[37] Ultimately, Catholic mainstream culture constrained the unsettling symbolic power of black martyrdom by relying on Christian mourning as a moment of personal and national healing, though failing to name explicitly the sinner along with the sin – white people benefiting from the disadvantage of people of color – and expressing concern not just for the indifference or complicity of many believers, but also for social/racial conflict seen as a lingering danger.

There are exceptions to this, of course. During the summer of 2020, photographic portraits of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery – a trinity of black people killed by police officers, usually recalled in BLM protests – were displayed on a side altar of St. Xavier Church in New York City, a Jesuit-led parish known for its social activism and a critical attitude towards bishops' "soft antiracism". The Jesuits' choice prompted controversy and became a subject of strong disapproval from some Catholic commentators. At the conclusion of every Sunday Mass parishioners were invited to recite a *Pledge for Racial Justice* which was based upon the will of remembering the victims of racism and making a communal self-examination «of institutional and systemic racial inequity – including the manifestation of that inequity in the Catholic Church». This liturgical addition, inspired by a text of the First Unitarian Church in Dallas, was posted online and drew much attention because of the livestream Mass pandemic format. The vow focused on the terms white privilege/white supremacy, and asked the largely-white parishioners to recognize how these notions operated in their everyday life. The aim was to combat any complicity in perpetuating the practices and institutions supporting racism,

36. *LA Catholics Remember Floyd, Call for Renewed Commitment against Racism*, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-06/los-angeles-archbishop-gomez-floyd-mass-racism-united-states.html.

37. Like in Forth Worth, Texas: *Mass for the Repose of the Soul of George Floyd and for Peace and an End to Civil Discord*, June 4, 2020: https://fortworthbishop.org/2020/06/04/mass-for-the-repose-of-the-soul-of-george-floyd-and-for-peace-and-an-end-to-civil-discord/.

broadly intended as a system in which advantages are taken for granted by white people and cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color.[38]

> *A Pledge for Racial Justice* Question format
>
> The Church of St. Francis Xavier joins with people throughout the world, in committing itself to racial justice. And so we pledge together: Please respond YES
> *Do you support* justice, equity, and compassion in human relations?
> *Do you affirm* that white privilege is unfair and harmful to those who have it and to those who do not?
> *Do you affirm* that white privilege and the culture of white supremacy must be dismantled wherever it is present?
> *Do you support* racial equity, justice, and liberation for every person?
> *Do you affirm* the inherent worth and dignity of every person?
>
> Therefore, from this day forward…
> *Will you* strive to understand more deeply the injustice and suffering white privilege and white supremacy cause?
> *Will you commit* to help transform our church culture to one that is actively engaged in seeking racial justice and equity for everyone.
> *Will you* make a greater effort to treat all people with the same respect you expect to receive?
> *Will you commit* to developing the courage to live your beliefs and values of racial justice and equality.
> *Will you* strive daily to eliminate racial prejudice from your thoughts and actions so that you can better promote the racial justice efforts of our church.
> *Will you* renew and honor this pledge daily, knowing that our church, our community, our nation, and our world will be better places because of my efforts.[39]

The objections to the pledge's weekly recitation by alt-right outlets, conservative media and traditionalist Catholic groups brought about the tensions caused by the antiracist "black martyrdom pattern". Catholic white nationalist Michelle Malkin accused the «revolting BLM prayer» of replacing Jesus with «St. George Floyd» and new "martyred saints", result-

38. Peter Feuerherd, *Manhattan Church Maintains Focus on Diversity, Anti-Racism Efforts*, in «National Catholic Reporter», November 20, 2020, https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/manhattan-church-maintains-focus-diversity-anti-racism-efforts.

39. *A Pledge for Racial Justice*, https://sfxavier.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/RACIAL-JUSTICE-PLEDGE.pdf.

ing in the corruption of the Christian faith for the benefit of a secular, fake religion worshipping «racial justice». Trumpist Fox News Anchor Tucker Carlson described the Jesuits' «White Privilege Pledge» as a detrimental, left-wing catechism substituting the Nicene Creed. Finally, right-wing, conspiracy theorist and evangelical radio host Eric Metaxas compared that antiracist liturgy declaring white privilege unfair and harmful to the totalitarian sacralization of politics, by equating the *Pledge for Racial Justice* and the icons of black people killed by law enforcement with a swastika on the altar. The argument was that, like in Germany where National Socialism co-opted the churches and unlike the postwar civil rights movement which was led by Christians, BLM supporters of identity politics and "wokeism" were God-hater Marxists infiltrating mainline churches in order to destroy Christianity from the inside and bring about the death of the Christian faith in America. According to this stance, what people could see was the final stage of culture wars.[40]

Significantly, statements from Catholic leaders, religious orders and organizations condemning antiblack racism oscillated between calling Floyd's death a useless, brutal killing, and alluding to a worthy sacrifice for racial reconciliation. My contention is that these opposing views are not just the natural result of different sensitivities at play. The underlying persistence of this sacrificial-martyrological rhetoric is the remains of an imaginative and intrusive paradigm bestowing meaning to the black condition. I propose to sum up some key steps of its cultural construction in the following pages, in order to trace back the "archeology", the legacies and the implications of that discourse, with a special focus on the Catholic responses and interaction.

3. *Antislavery martyrs*

The first movement of opinion that employed the figure of martyrdom for black liberation as a political tool was antislavery radical abolitionism in antebellum America. Nevertheless, this did not immediately coincide with the rise of the leitmotif of black martyrdom. Above all, antislavery advocates conveyed a narrative of «emancipatory martyrdom» whose heroes were northern, white, dedicated reformers, many of them driven by

40. Feuerherd, *Focus on Diversity*.

the religious revival of the Second Great Awakening, pietism, post-millennialism and messianic zeal. Radical abolitionists often imagined themselves as missionaries motivated by the goal of eradicating the dreadful «sin of slavery» at the cost of personal suffering and even death. Such an ideology of heroic self-sacrifice and self-denying, both rooted in evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment legacy, was spread in popular culture via the characteristic media of "print capitalism" (newspapers, pamphlets, novels, poetry, pictures). It was conceived as a crusade against evil and moral corruption, fought by a saintly avant-garde group called to defend the Gospel of the slaves' redemption from their cruel oppression, and save a nation that was believed to be the New Jerusalem. The rhetoric of martyrdom shaped private writings and memorial literature consecrated to some renowned abolitionists, especially those who were executed, killed by mobs, or sentenced to prison while pursuing the utopia of a worldwide triumph of liberty and equality starting from the milestone of the emancipation of black slaves.[41]

In her classic work, Hazel Catherine Wolf summarized the «martyrdom complex» which pervaded the lives of several activists, of which the American Antislavery Society was a pivotal promoter.[42] Elija P. Lovejoy – the «first American martyr of *freedom of the press, and the freedom of the slave*»[43] – is the typical champion of what essayist Harriet Martineau called *The Martyr Age of the United States*.[44] A Presbyterian minister and

41. See Eyal J. Naveh, *Crown of Thorn. Political Martyrdom in America from Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.*, New York, New York University Press, 1990, chapter 1 (*Suffering for the sin of slavery*) and Adrian Chastain Weimer, *Martyrdom in North America*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. John Corrigan, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.433. Transcendentalism fostered this rhetoric: Peter Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law. Black and White Transcendentalists against Slavery*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021.

42. Hazel Catherine Wolf, *On Freedom's Altar. The Martyr Complex in the Abolition Movement*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1952.

43. Joseph C. Lovejoy, Owen Lovejoy, *Memoir of the Rev. Elijah P. Lovejoy Who Was Murdered in Defense of the Liberty of the Press, at Alton, Illinois, Nov. 7, 1837*, introduction by John Quincy Adams, New York, John S. Taylor, 1838, p. 12. The iconography of Lovejoy's martyrdom typically depicts the allegory of the freedom of the press addressing the image of the kneeling black slave (with broken chains). See Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, *Lovejoy the First Martyr to American Liberty. Murdered for Asserting the Freedom of the Press at Alton Nov. 7, 1837*, The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1839. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-75d1-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99.

44. Herriet Marineau, *The Martyr Age of the United States*, Boston, Weeks Jordan, 1839.

a white abolitionist owner of a printing press in Alton, IL, Lovejoy was shot and killed in 1837 by an angry proslavery mob which set fire to his printing press, after he took up arms in self-defense. Obituaries and commemorative materials pointed out an analogy between his sacrifice and the crucifixion of Jesus. However, leading antislavery advocate William Lloyd Garrison deplored Lovejoy's use of weapons as contrary to nonviolent resistance and willing acceptance of suffering and death, which were the authentic markers of Christian martyrdom. «Lovejoy was certainly a martyr», he wrote, «but, strictly speaking, he was not […] a *Christian* martyr. He died like Warren, not like Stephen» (as Joseph Warren, the American Revolution hero, and not St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr).[45]

The problem raised here is crucial. It concerns the way martyr theology entails the possibility of sanctioning or even actively committing violence as a means for pursuing a holy fight and a purging of society through bloodshed. This has been a tricky one also for Roman Catholic moralists, who starting from the 19th century have begun to make gradual distinctions between the status of martyrs and holy warriors, considering the use of force as being an obstacle to the basic requirement of the resignation to die for Christ.[46] The John Brown affair is an extreme example of this problem. Sentenced to death and executed in 1859, the Captain became a media martyr during the Civil War, although he was not a representative of the majority of white abolitionist sentiment over black liberation. The construction of Brown's myth started from his trial, and drew upon his letters which gained a transnational audience, being able to ignite an emotional surge of empathy in American and European public opinion.[47] His terroristic raids and guerrilla combat, aimed at retaliating against proslavery settlers' oppression and triggering a slave rebellion, fueled an unsettling plot which evoked the classic Christ-like martyrological cliché, making death by hanging a redeeming sacrifice for the slaying of the sin of slavery, and an incendiary representation of the rebel-martyr as God's Avenger and

45. *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879. The Story of His Life Told by His Children*, New York, The Century Co., 1885, p. 190.

46. See the remarks by Daniele Menozzi, *"Crociata". Storia di un'ideologia dalla Rivoluzione francese a Bergoglio*, Roma, Carocci, 2020, p. 61.

47. Seymour Drescher, *Servile Insurrection and John Brown's Body in Europe*, in «The Journal of American History», 80/2 (1993), pp. 499-524. About the construction of Brown's martyrdom, see the classic biography by Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown. The Making of a Martyr*, New York, Payson and Clarke Ltd., 1929.

the liberator-executioner of the divine retribution. Brown's violent opposition to slavery stemmed from an eschatology, involving the idea of America's exceptional status, which interpreted violence as regenerative, and assumed that foreseeable vengeance from black insurgents against white sinners would be the sign of the kingdom of God's coming age.[48]

The problem of active violence – inflicted, instead of suffered – calls into question the legitimacy of black violent martyrdom, which was precisely a bone of contention in the 19th-20th century struggle against proslavery and later white supremacist racism. Along with John Brown's myth, the troublesome legacy of enslaved African American preacher Nat Turner should also be taken into account. In 1831 he led the bloodiest slave uprising in American history, during which fifty-five white Virginians, including women and children, were killed. Turner, who was tried and executed for this slaughter, shared the same apocalyptic view of white radical abolitionists, seeing himself as God's messenger. His *Confessions* issued to the lawyer Thomas R. Gray during his imprisonment recounted, in a powerful way, the brutality of living as a slave, and reported Turner's own mystic stature, going to his death in rags and chains, as a Christian martyr more than as a murderer.[49] Embodying the quintessential slave rebel, the representation of Turner boosted in white audiences the haunting specter of black insurrection.

The prominent place gained in the American collective imagination by such psychosis established a double racial standard in popular culture media and white abolitionist culture, by which rebellious martyrdom envisaging the use of violence as a means of empowerment was reserved for white people only, whereas black martyrdom was inherently imagined as disciplined, nonviolent, and unarmed. Antebellum mainline antislavery activists consistently undermined calls for African Americans' physical response to proslavery oppression, thus marginalizing the scenario of black

48. See Zoe Trodd, *John Brown's Spirit: The Abolitionist Aesthetic of Emancipatory Martyrdom in Early Antilynching Protest Literature*, in «Journal of American Studies», 49/2 (2015), pp. 305-321; Philippe Buc, *Holy War, Martyrdom, and Terror. Christianity, Violence, and the West*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, pp. 154-161; Franny Nudelman, *John Brown's Body. Slavery, Violence, & the Culture of War*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

49. M. Cooper Harriss, *Where Is the Voice Coming From? Rhetoric, Religion, and Violence in "The Confessions of Nat Turner"*, in «Soundings. An Interdisciplinary Journal», 89/1-2 (2006), pp. 135-170.

people fighting with guns and dying for their freedom – under Henry Ward Beecher's principle that rifles would do more good than a hundred Bibles in persuading proslavery people.[50] The white fear of armed slave revolts and black resistance supported the abolitionist cause, eventually. But the effect was to disarm blacks, literally and "literarily". Antislavery propagandists and intellectuals promoted a reassuring discourse, which focusing on individual suffering of blacks at the hands of slave owners or white supremacist lynching crowds who claimed to be Christians, reframed the threatening portrayal of the black rebel into the pious, loyal, submissive Christian martyr, a stranger to violent acts against white authority.[51]

This shift from black emancipatory martyrdom – seen as a dangerous construct, inciting chaos and social disruption – to passive, suffering martyrdom gained currency in the 19th century general public, being more acceptable to the average white audience's taste shaped by sentimentalism, and thus easier to be sympathetically endorsed. Such a rhetorical device, developed not by slave narrators (that is, the victims of white racism) but by actors distanced from them, worked in order to elicit sympathy and indignation across races. As has been remarked, this strategy counteracted common sense of the 19th century arguing that black people were to withstand the yoke of enslavement, by making white people sympathize with blacks oppressed by racial violence, feel sorry for their ruthless and unjust condition, and consequently acknowledge the need to recognize their basic rights.[52] The religious language of martyrdom allowed for the bridging of

50. See Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom. Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019 (p. 93 for the reference to Herriet Beecher Stowe's brother).

51. Sarah N. Roth, *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, chapter 4.

52. See *Sentimentalism in Nineteenth-Century America. Literary and Cultural Practices*, ed. Mary G. De Jong, Madison (NJ), Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2013. I refer to the interpretative remarks by Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights. A History*, New York-London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007 and Lynn M. Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, Baltimore (MD), Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Harriet Beecher Stowe followed a "sentimental aesthetics" by conceiving storytelling as a series of *tableaux*, because – she claimed – «there is no arguing with *pictures* […] and everybody is impressed by them, whether they mean to be or not»: Lynn Wardley, *Relic, Fetish, Femmage: The Aesthetics of Sentiment in the Work of Stowe*, in *The Culture of Sentiment. Gender, Race, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Shirley Samuels, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 214.

the gap between proslavery logic and romantic emotionality. On the other hand, it codified a persuasive and long-lasting palimpsest that did not question the power relations at the heart of antiblack racism, and would represent a binding, self-perpetuating pattern in spite of changing contexts.

The effectiveness of that master narrative is embodied by the tremendous popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). The most famous bestselling novel of the 19th century after the Bible featured a Christ-like protagonist who disavowed retributive black violence, lacked animosity, practiced self-denial, and cheerfully tolerated harassment from his merciless masters. In short he was antithetical to the model of black, assertive manliness – an ideal claimed by personalities such as Frederick Douglass, who recommended armed self-defense to blacks facing personal threats under the Fugitive Slave Act: «a good revolver, a steady hand and a determination to shoot down any man attempting to kidnap».[53] Northern American and European readers could find in Uncle Tom's forgiveness and meekness of spirit an unprecedented storytelling of black Christian manhood. Stowe's literary paradigm of black martyrdom – the last chapters of her novel were built on the parallel between Christ and the «patient sufferer, gentle martyr», tried by torture and persecution – drew on a well-grounded evangelical imagination and iconography which evoked the theme of slaves' agony and closeness to Jesus's cross. Black victimization required feeling sorry for enslaved people; however, it did not exclude a "benevolent" racism depicting slaves as Christian human types to be freed, but not to be treated as equals. However, the media success of martyr language prompted even black people to endorse such a rhetoric. One of the key-factors of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s global impact on public opinion, far beyond fictional significance and literary passions, was the religious undertone related to "romantic racialism" which attributed to blackness an ambivalent innate religiosity. While antebellum abolitionists created the blackophile cliché of the naturally Christian "Negro", docile of heart and childlike in trusting God, so as to affirm their humanity, post-Reconstruction churchmen and intellectuals addressed mostly the emotional, primitive and childish "burden of black religion", needful of conversion, moral regeneration or simply modernization.[54]

53. Nicholas Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun. The Black Tradition of Arms*, Amherst (NY), Prometheus Books, 2004, p. 37.

54. Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. Uncle Tom's significance in public debate and mass culture – a Christ-like

Even if the discourse of abolitionist black martyrdom reached an international public across confessional barriers, it should be noted that the Catholic culture looked at it suspiciously. The attacks on Stowe's blockbuster from the Catholic press and intelligentsia are revealing of the substantial hostility towards an incredibly popular plot which was generally praised by audiences as a contemporary fulfillment of Christian values. The reason why "intransigent"[55] Catholic culture tended to frown on Uncle Tom's martyr trope lay precisely in the broad religious and political implications behind such an imagery. Both U.S. and European Catholics condemned trade slavery as immoral and did not generally treat domestic slavery as God's will, but nonetheless thought that this institution was not inherently contrary to the law of nature. In contrast, they envisaged immediate emancipation of the slaves to be the highest danger for social order and a greater evil than the mitigation of slavery, which consisted in preaching Christian charity to the masters, Christian resignation to the slaves, and the prevention of any abuse. The Catholic Church opposed abolitionism, basically, with the exception of some liberal trends. As a result, the popular narrative of black martyrdom took a subversive meaning, and became a thorny political issue, as it validated the puritan, rationalist, abolitionist *summa* of modern errors: that is, the celebration of Protestant heterodoxy leading to radical liberalism supported by fanatics, revolutionaries, and destroyers of social order and Christianity itself. Ultimately, Uncle Tom's abolitionist mysticism revived the nightmare of the anti-Catholic «Red Republicanism» and the «socialist slant» of 1848.[56]

The Roman Jesuit journal «La Civiltà Cattolica» took a stand against the alleged sectarian propaganda embedded in Tom's African American character by denouncing the twisted and fake novel's «hagiography»

martyr, or a subservient African American reinforcing the idea of black inferiority? – was recently historicized by Adena Spingarn, *Uncle Tom. From Martyr to Traitor*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018.

55. Within the meaning of Émile Poulat, *Église contre bourgeoisie. Introduction au devenir du catholicisme actuel*, Paris, Casterman, 1977.

56. So according, for example, to New York «Freeman's Journal and Catholic Register» and to Paris newspaper «L'Univers». See John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom. A History*, New York-London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2003, pp. 43-90 and Joseph Rossi, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and Protestantism in Italy*, in «American Quarterly», 11/3 (1959), pp. 416-424. See also Suzanne Krebsbach, *Rome's Response to Slavery in the United States*, in «The Catholic Historical Review», 105/2 (2019), pp. 327-344.

which relied on heretical sentimental imagination and focused «on the virtues so marvelous the Negroes acquire by the *sole* reading of the *sole* Bible», without the beneficial influence of the Catholic Church's teaching. The Jesuit magazine, while it did not overall consider the bestseller a «bad book», made some theological and racial arguments to strongly contest its abolitionist approach. According to the author of the article, Father Valentino Steccanella, who shared the widespread religious prejudice against blacks including the myth of the curse of Ham (Genesis 9:20-27), slavery concerned a «race which had never been civilized», held the «low end of humankind», and whose «slow intellectual faculties» testified its descent from Noah's son. Black condition of degradation, descending from an inferior state of nature, could only be uplifted by Catholic evangelization, and not by modern civilization grounded on human rights. Natural differences could not be «taken off by the articles of law». This is why abolitionism calling for a universal, secular, unqualified legal equality was presented as a wrong, counterproductive, and finally dangerous option, empowering «narrow minded» people. Even though agreeing with the feeling of compassion and indignation raised by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the evangelical, egalitarian and humanitarian ideology of black martyrdom, sacralizing abolitionism, was held as politically flawed.[57]

So it is no surprise that «*the abolitionist novel*» was even reviewed by the Sacred Congregation of the Index once it was translated into Italian. The book was denounced by a local inquisitor as a means of Methodist propaganda, incitement to revolution, and misinterpretation of the Catholic doctrine on slavery and blackness. Archival documentation offers a glimpse into the mentality of the Vatican Curia in this regards. One consultor argued for the novel's ban, apparently taking no interest in its core theme – the abhorrence of the inhuman condition of black, "martyred" slaves – and then giving priority to the error of the «slave Tom as the priest of the false Methodist Gospel»: an idealization intended to justify the revolutionary principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity against legitimate authorities and social differences willed by God. However, a second consultor gave a counter-defense of the book's main topic, presenting the

57. [Valentino Steccanella], *La schiavitù in America e la Capanna dello zio Tom*, in «La Civiltà Cattolica», 2nd series, 4/2 (1853), pp. 481-499. See also Alberto Placucci, *Chiese bianche schiavi neri. Cristianesimo e schiavitù Negra negli Stati Uniti d'America (1619-1865)*, Torino, Gribaudi, 1990, pp. 212-218.

abolition of slavery as a future goal which was fully compliant with the Catholic stance. The final Congregation's decision not to censor the novel, and to dismiss the case, corroborated, however, the Church's reluctance to side with the politically sensitive cause of "black martyrdom".[58]

4. *Black martyrdom and the lynching frame*

After the outbreak of the Civil War – when the enlistment of African Americans in the Union's army brought forth the icon of the black soldier-martyr, taking up weapons against proslavery white men –, the cliché of humble black martyrdom returned to being dominant in Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction antilynching literature. Scholars have analyzed in depth the underlying religious aspects of the «lynching spectacle» that native-born white vigilante mobs set up by torturing, executing and sometimes burning African Americans, in order to implement "white revenge" against black advancement. The peak of white-on-black lynchings in the era of the Jim Crow segregation (1890s-1930s) took on the appearance of ritualized performances enacting the political religion of the Lost Cause and white supremacy, whose extreme, "negrophobic" and Anglo-Saxonist version was epitomized by the Ku Klux Klan's (KKK) «mystical wing». The rituals of mob killing, aimed at punishing racial transgressions and clearing Southerner society from the moral threat to white purity caused by black emancipation, were imagined according to a self-victimizing rhetoric which reversed the roles and responsibilities between victims and executioners. White-on-black racial violence could therefore be justified as a holy, defensive act of retribution/ expiation ordained by God for black sinfulness, criminal attitude, savagery, and degeneration. Even though some church leaders took a public stance against lynching, the general trend was acquiescence, silence and complicity. Mainline Christian ministers' nostalgic paternalism adhered to a racialized frame romanticizing the old-time morality against the post-bellum decline. While positing black inferiority and endorsing antiblack repression, white Christians in the American South legitimized racial violence as inevitable despite them invoking charity and moderation. They generally shared, and perpetuated, southern racist

58. Hubert Wolf, *Storia dell'Indice. Il Vaticano e i libri proibiti*, Roma, Donzelli, 2006, pp. 141-167.

cultural tropes and bias about the blacks' inclination towards crime and sexual violence.[59]

In response to white supremacist «religious practice» and symbolism, black-authored fictional and nonfictional narratives understood lynching within religious patterns, by implementing a counter-discourse that transformed the "black beast rapist" in a martyr imitating Jesus. Starting from the 1890s – and long before the rise of Black theology in the civil rights era – a number of black ministers, poets, novelists, artists and intellectuals imagined ritual mob killings as modern crucifixions, transforming the supposed criminals into innocent victims and saintly witnesses of racial equality. In doing so, and in exploiting abolitionist imagery, they created a widespread sense which gradually nourished a wave of moral outrage stigmatizing the racial terror which had been tolerated over a long period of time. That moral consciousness-raising was the foundation of the early 20th century antilynching campaign which was carried out, in particular, by the NAACP and «The Crisis». The magazine's powerful militancy, aimed at getting a federal law, took shape in the choice of publishing a series of brutal photos that inverted the racist sacralization of antiblack violence by representing the lynch victims as Christ-like figures worthy of the honest white people's sympathy and outrage.[60]

Independent black churches emerging in the postbellum era became the key agencies in the construction of this victimization narrative conceptualizing death by lynching as a Christian sacrifice. In so doing, they primarily underlined the apolitical, redemptive power of black martyrdom. This was not a necessary outcome. Alongside the hegemonic narrative framing lynch victims as «dehumanized sufferers who were deserving of legal protection and sympathy», there was another minority option, framing victims as champions of heroic manliness, inspiring «black Americans to fight back against their oppression». Nevertheless, the reference to black subjectivity, expressed in grassroots protest and armed resistance, was relegated to second place by black-authored print culture and later by interracial civil rights organizations like the NAACP. The emphasis on the lynched blacks

59. Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood. The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920*, Athens (GA), University of Georgia Press, 2009 (1st edition 1980).

60. See Michelle Kuhl, *Modern Martyrs. African American Responses to Lynching, 1880-1940*, Ph.D dissertation, Binghamton (NY), Binghamton University, 2004 and Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle. Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina Press, 2009, pp. 45-68 and 183-221.

as harmless sufferers and perfect, Christian victims of white racial violence offered a more effective way for provoking empathy in white Americans, thus ensuring a broader antilynching consensus. This strategy resulted in stigmatizing racial violence on religious grounds, affirming blacks' dignity and humanity, and finally creating a national support for a federal antilynching bill. However, the rise of the discourse of martyrdom did not convey the idea of black empowerment per se. The victimization rhetoric not only overshadowed the memory of black vigilantism, that is black-on-black lynching and also black-on-white lynching which took place up to the 1890s; but it also concealed the stories of African Americans standing and fighting back against their executioners, or even killing some of them, because it preferred focusing on what white lynchers did – instead on what black lynch victims did before they died, individually or collectively resisting against white supremacist violence.[61] More generally, the rhetorical convention of passive martyrdom would hide and exorcize any kind of black political violence against white authorities.[62]

The burning of Sam Hose in 1899 Georgia can be mentioned as a watershed, which was identified as a biographical turning point by «The Crisis» future founding editor W.E.B. Du Bois. After that terrible event, he concluded that he could not be a detached scientist «while Negros were lynched, murdered and starved». «Sam Hose was crucified», he wrote after the killing and a few years later in his classic *The Souls of Black Folk*.[63] The civil rights activist and acclaimed scholar used the evocative Christian imagery of crucifixion as a political denunciation of the white Church. His approach to Christianity recrafted religious symbols in order to fight racist white violence, capitalism, and imperialism. Du Bois strongly believed that people of color were the representatives of the Gospel's spirit in a sick nation. African Americans «exalt[ed] the Lynched above the Lyncher, and the Worker above the Owner, and the Crucified above Imperial Rome».[64] At the same time, Du Bois himself strongly criticized "slave religion"

61. See Karlos K. Hill, *Beyond the Rope. The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016 (quotations at p. 11).

62. Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice. A History of Lynching in America*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee, 2011, pp. 42-44.

63. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007 (1st edition 1903), pp. 259-260.

64. Edward J. Blum, *"There Won't Be Any Rich People in Heaven": The Black Christ, White Hypocrisy, and the Gospel According to W.E.B. Du Bois*, in «The Journal of African American History», 90/4 (2005), pp. 368-386: p. 377.

as «a religion of resignation and submission», fed by the deep fatalism «painted so beautifully in "Uncle Tom"». Hence his attack on the martyr's ideology of death and suffering affecting African Americans, which easily degenerated into «an infinite capacity for dumb suffering», namely acquiescence and indulgence towards crime.[65]

Du Bois' views on lynching demonstrate the paradox characterizing black American intelligentsia – churchmen, poets, writers and artists, such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes – involved in the Harlem Renaissance and in the "New Negro" radicalism. In the 20th century black literary imagination, the noble figure of the lynched martyr, regarded as equivalent to a black Christi recrucified, was deliberately associated with the submissive death for a cause (instead of cowardice or powerlessness), and used as a weapon of propaganda. Nevertheless, this competed with another political discourse on racial fighting, based on the call to brave manhood that came in the concrete option of violent self-defense. In the Reconstruction era, after all, the right to bear arms had been assumed as a symbol for black equality. The institutionalization of white supremacy justified lynching and Klan terrorism as well as the disarming of blacks through gun control. The crucifixion-lynching paradigm sacralizing the act of suffering was challenged by black responses based on the need to carry weapons, and – as the founder of the African-Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop Henty McNeil Turner said in 1897 – to «keep them loaded and ready for immediate use». Du Bois also praised black self-defense against Booker T. Washington's "accomodationism". After the Chicago and Washington riots of 1919 and the Tulsa massacre of 1921, for instance, he approved violent resistance instead of the ethos of suffering.[66] As one of the most creative minds of that time, Du Bois himself was one of the major architects of the popularization of the theme of black martyrdom through fiction and "martyr tales" that inverted the traditional hierarchy of the qualities of races. Being firmly attached to the belief of the moral superiority of the African character compared to the brutality of the Teutonic race, he nonetheless used martyrdom

65. Donald G. Mathews, *At the Altar of Lynching. Burning Sam Hose in the American South*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 134-135.

66. Kevin Yuill, *'Better Die Fighting against Injustice than to Die Like a Dog': African-Americans and Guns, 1866-1941*, in *A Cultural History of Firearms in the Age of Empire*, eds. Karen Jones, Giacomo Macola and David Welch, London, Routledge, 2016, pp. 227-228.

as a "pragmatic" trope to state his racialist conviction, and exorcise at the same time the dangerous, counterproductive fantasies of armed rebellion.[67]

This trope, as stated above, was not a Du Bois invention. Several black ministers saw lynchings as part of a God's plan to elevate African Americans against complacent or negligent whites, and hasten an era of racial justice. While denunciations were rare in white, mainline churches until the 1910s, a change of climate occurred in the 1920s. By 1930, a generic antilynching consensus became mainstream in most Christian churches; even though ministers kept being reluctant in preaching against mob violence lynching became a matter of concern. The Catholic Church was a separate chapter in this story. In 1891 the Jesuit Salvatore Brandi addressed the issue of the morality of lynching in «La Civiltà Cattolica», dealing with an episode of extrajudicial killing of Italians and Italian Americans in the New Orleans, LA. In taking a clear stance against the «leprosy» of the «Lynch law» – the «*linciamento*» was defined as a serious crime contrary to natural law and public order –, Brandi reduced this to the pathology of modern democracy based on popular sovereignty instead of the church's teaching as stated in Leo XIII's magisterium on Christian democracy.[68] «La Civiltà Cattolica» did not directly address the issue of antiblack lynching yet. Even when this was done by Catholic actors, for instance in the 1903 resolution of the American Federation of Catholic Societies condemning «race feuds, riots, and mob law as unworthy of civilized people», such a protest censured lynching in a very elusive way. The declaration adopted by the Catholic laity suggested an assimilation of black defensive violence and white racist violence. Furthermore, it stressed the nature of the barbarous character of lynching as «a menace to the peace and security of all good citizens».[69] What was missing was an outspoken condemnation of white supremacist terrorism. As has been noted, in their pastoral letter of 1919 American bishops gathering for the first time in the National Catholic Welfare Conference did not expressly denounce antiblack violence during the so-called Red Summer, but rather targeted racial conflict, lynching and rioting without

67. Michelle Kuhl, *Resurrecting Black Manhood: Du Bois's Martyr Tales*, in *The Souls of W.W.B. Du Bois. New Essays and Reflections*, eds. Edward J. Blum and Jason R. Young, Macon (GA), Mercer University Press, 2009, pp. 160-187.

68. [Salvatore Brandi], *La legge di Lynch negli Stati Uniti*, in «La Civiltà Cattolica», 14th series, 42/12 (1891), pp. 266-277.

69. *Catholics on Lynching*, in «NYT», August 6, 1903, p. 2.

distinction. In this context, the generic deprecation of «racial hatred» representing a serious obstacle to the evangelization of black people focused on both the urgency of the "Negro problem" to be solved and the paternalist vision of the "Negro" needing to learn «the lesson of Christian virtue» in order to successfully contribute to the general good.[70]

Catholic hesitation was the result of a wider cultural background, shared by Vatican circles, which were inclined to deplore the painful condition of African Americans and which worked for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the «negroes», but equally avoided challenging the status quo, because it ultimately relied on a racialized image of black people as culturally inferior, potentially dangerous and as being seen as law-breakers.[71] This "benevolent racism" prevented U.S. mainline Catholics, especially in southern states, from supporting an unconditional religious opposition to lynching, as it conveyed the specter of a «Negro rule» erasing white/black power relations and upsetting social order based on segregation.[72] The Catholic church, along with other predominantly white Protestant denominations, gradually took a specific antilynching stance that was grounded on arguments far from the ideology of black martyrdom used by African American Protestants and intellectuals. Such an attitude de-racialized lynching by presenting it not as a white-on-black crime which was statistically and culturally mostly related to black suffering and victimhood, but as an offence to sound, lawful and orderly democracy, ultimately to Americanism.[73] This being so, since 1935 – an important year marked by the huge success of the New York antilynching art exhibitions aimed at enhancing the cause of the Costigan-Wagner Bill and increasing public awareness of the horrors of lynch murders – liberal Catholic voices strongly backed new federal antilynching legislation introduced to Congress on

70. Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States*, New York, Crossroad Publishing, 1990, pp. 216-217.

71. Alejandro Mario Dieguez, *Governo della Chiesa e vigilanza sulle Chiese nelle plenarie della Congregazione concistoriale. Proposte degli eminentissimi Padri e decisioni del Santo Padre*, in *Le gouvernement pontifical sous Pie XI. Pratiques romaines et gestion de l'universel*, ed. Laura Pettinaroli, Roma, École française de Rome, 2013, pp. 585-606: pp. 594-595.

72. See, for instance, James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2005, p. 60.

73. Aaron Griffith, *"The Real Victim of Lynch Law Is the* Government*": American Protestant Anti-Lynching Advocacy and the Making of Law and Order*, in «Religions», 2 (2019), DOI: 10.3390/rel10020116.

the side of the NAACP, but continued to depict extra-legal violence as a southern exceptionality, not necessarily connecting it to the issue of racial justice or to the uncompromising refusal of any differential treatment for black people.[74]

"Interracialists" who gathered around the Jesuit John LaFarge Jr. and the «Interracial Review» – the mouthpiece of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York (CICNY) born with the aim of combating «race prejudice» and accomplishing social justice «regardless of race»[75] – joined antilynching art propaganda with conviction. Together with other Catholic media outlets, the magazine praised the religious significance of the NAACP initiative by hosting a sympathetic review by Catholic art critic James W. Lane. This endorsed the centrality of Christian meanings behind visual representations of lynching, and their role in stirring empathy in viewers and communicating white racist moral inferiority. Some artworks in particular typified a Catholic-compliant sensibility which did not indulge in the most explicit and horrifying images of lynch violence – like the castration of the black male body. If Reginald Marsh's drawing *This is Her First Lynching* portrayed the grotesque reactions of a white mob attending a murder as it were entertainment without displaying violence, Simms Campbell's famous drawing *I Passed Along This Way* turned to a well-established religious language of grieving by showing «Our Lord carrying His cross […] accompanied by a poor [black] lynched victim». The religious vocabulary of black martyrdom thus entered the Catholic interracialist mainstream through the emotional impact of pictures whose «moral challenge» – as Lane wrote – was «tremendous».[76] It should also be noted that this happened at the cost of a "white" domestication of the most disruptive implications of the martyrial trope. It is not by chance that Christian allegories were criticized by a number of contemporary activists, especially from the left, who regarded the reference to Christ's suffering as

74. See Paul E. Czuchlewski, *Liberal Catholicism and American Racism 1924-1960*, in «Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia», 85/3-4 (1974), pp. 144-162.

75. See David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963*, Baton Rouge (LA), Louisiana State University Press, 1996 and Martin A. Zielinski, *Working for Interracial Justice: The Catholic Interracial Council of New York, 1934-1964*, in «U.S. Catholic Historian», 7/2-3 (1988), pp. 233-262.

76. James W. Lane, *Lynching. As the Artist Sees It*, in «Interracial Review» («IR»), 8/3 (1935), p. 36 [March].

a palliative that restrained indignation and was incapable of inculcating the desire of social struggle.[77]

It is significant that the «Interracial Review» rejected lynching as a «veritable state of anarchy wherein the forces of law and order are openly defied and superseded by the rule of the mob», whose disastrous effect was to feed «counter-hatred», calling for further «counter-violence», and finally give «grist to the mill of the revolutionist», that is play into the hands of Communism. In other words, white supremacist terrorism was thought to aid the cause of radicals who sought to «overthrow the government by violent revolution», and destroy «the harmony and toleration of the American people». This "red scare" was powered by the specter that the precedent of the Spanish Civil War cast a shadow over the United States too, transforming race riots originating from the KKK and the Black Legion acts into a revolutionary turmoil fueled by «class hatred of every type». As a result, white supremacist violence was to be dismissed as a moral evil, a product of secularism, an enemy of Christian civilization, and a helper to Communism, anarchism and subversion (or later a Nazi propaganda weapon against the United States).[78] A drawing by Constance Mary Rowe, also known as Sister Mary of the Compassion, O.P., illustrated the link «between mob violence and subversive movement» by depicting a meeting of Communist activists cheering for the KKK and Black Legion terroristic actions («Comrade, rejoice! Another lynching»).[79]

5. *A Catholic route to black martyrdom*

In short, interracialists joined the symbolism of black martyrdom within a counter-revolutionary, anti-Communist and non-conflictual framework, in order to speak out against white racist vigilante killings and at the same time propose to African Americans, and black Catholics, a model of discipline and obedience opposed to social protest and rioting. Moreover, this antilynching mobilization was grounded on a self-exculpatory discourse

77. Helen Langa, *Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints*, in «American Art», 13/1 (1999), pp. 10-39.

78. *Lynching and Communism*, in «IR», 9/5 (1936), pp. 147-148 [October]. See also *Lynching and the Axis*, in «The Commonweal», 35/2 (1937), pp. 27-28 [October 30].

79. Constance Mary Rowe, *The Vanguard of the Bloody Revolution*, in «IR», 9/5 (1936), p. 155 [October].

that brought about mob outrages from irreligion and above all conceived them as a «contagious» evil affecting not «only Negroes», but in the same way «Jews, Catholics, and members of other minority groups».[80] Even in cautiously progressive, interracialists groups, lynching was not seen as a specific expression of antiblack racism, because it consisted above all in the «violation of fundamental Catholic principles, – the maintenance of law and order, the preservation of human rights and insistence upon the sanctity of human life».[81] A typical example is the attention paid to the terroristic acts committed by the Black Legion, a pro-nativist clandestine organization active in the Midwest which targeted all non-Protestant immigrants and minorities, as well as labor unions, together with African Americans. The «Interracial Review» connected the murders of Charles Poole, a white Catholic, and Silas Coleman, a black laborer and veteran, who was killed just because his executioner wanted to know «how it felt to shoot a Negro». This last episode inspired the publication of a brush and ink drawing by liturgical artist Ade Bethune, who was at that time a social activist and illustrator of the «Catholic Worker». Her artwork, focusing on the «thrill murder» of a helpless black man, is illustrative of the Catholic reception and reconsideration of martyrdom imagery, as the shooting is explicitly equated to the crucifixion of Christ expressed in this quotation from Matthew 25:40, «What you have done to the least of these, you have done to me» (picture 2).[82] The result is a very ambivalent message. On the one hand, the drawing can be read as a sort of declaration for Catholic believers that antiblack racist violence means crucifying Jesus again and unquestionably betraying Christian faith. On the other hand, Christianity, and consequently Catholicism, is here itself evoked as a target of the same God-less, pagan violence, as well as the only means to lend dignity and relief to black Americans in the middle of such a terrible ordeal, preventing them from nurturing anger and vengeance.

Take Harlem Renaissance sculptor Richmond Barthé. In addition to being the first modern African American sculptor to achieve critical success, he was a devoted Catholic too, who consecrated a number of works to religious subjects by coming into contact with LaFarge and the CICNY. In

80. *Catholics and the Anti-Lynching Bill*, in «IR», 9/9 (1936), pp. 131-133 [September].

81. *Lynching and Other Mob Outrage*, in «IR», 9/8 (1936), pp. 115-116 [August]. See also *Minority Groups and Mob Violence*, in «IR», 9/7 (1936), pp. 99-100 [July].

82. *News Item*, in «IR», 9/9 (1937), p. 136 [September].

particular, one of these, *The Mother* (1934), established him as a renowned artist. As Barthé explained in an interview for the «Interracial Review», the sculpture showed «the agony of a Negro mother at the moment when she receives into her arms the body of her lynched son» (picture 3). In this black *Pietà*, which appeared before a large public in the 1939 New York World's Fair, the dead man's body was depicted nude but anatomically intact, and not disfigured as in other African American portrayals of lynching. It is also remarkable that, despite such an engaged artwork having a disruptive content of social criticism, and even though the executive secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, had tried to involve him in the 1935 exhibition, Barthé refused to take part in the antilynching event, because he wanted to avoid too much politically charged readings of his art – «"Art is not racial", was his definite response. "For me, there is no "Negro art […]. It makes no differences in my approach to the subject whether I am to model a Scandinavian or an African dancer».[83]

The church renitence in sacralizing the death by lynching of African Americans went hand in hand with the promotion of an autonomous counter-model of black martyrdom, which was far from political issues such as desegregation, antiracism, and black equality. An orthodox and hagiographical pattern – a Catholic route to black martyrdom trope – was provided by the cult of the twenty-two Uganda martyrs beatified in 1920 by Benedict XV and canonized in 1964 by Paul VI. Their model of sainthood originated in the White Fathers' and Cardinal Charles Lavigerie's missionary ideology of civilization, which viewed the "Negro race" as a heathen, wretched, suffering mass of peoples in search for religious, civil and racial redemption. Such a vision was embedded in an antislavery, triumphalist narrative of blacks' salvation from degradation through the conversion to Christianity, resulting in the refusal of wild traditional lifestyle and the adherence to a new set of moral standards.[84] The imaginary construction leading to the transformation of the execution of Christian converts in 1885-1887, young royal pages for the most part, by the political leadership of Buganda into the «*martyrdom of Catholic Ugandans*» is to be

83. *Richmond Barthé. Sculptor*, in «IR», 12/7 (1939), pp. 107-108 [July]. See Margaret Rose Vendryes, *Barthé. A Life in Sculpture*, Jackson (MS), The University Press of Mississippi, 2008, pp. 79-81.

84. Aylward Shorter, *Cross and Flag in Africa. The White Fathers during the Colonial Scramble 1892-1914*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 2006.

set in a clot of meanings intersecting religious apostolate, civilizing tasks, and colonial antiblack racism which characterized Catholic intervention in the scramble for Africa.[85]

What is remarkable here is that the first Catholic saints of Sub-Saharian Africa were black martyrs killed by black executioners. Their story could hardly operate as a denunciation of racial prejudice and white violence at all. As a matter of fact, this hagiographical construct translated a convertionist, transnationally widespread idea of a paternalistic "Negro apostolate" into a reason for which African and African American people needed to be regenerated from their vices and inferiority, and only thanks to Christian pedagogy could they restore their own human dignity as a preliminary condition to access equality and full rights. As you can read in a bestselling booklet by the Italian Comboni Missionary of the Heart of Jesus Giuseppe Beduschi, republished several times up to the 1960s, the Uganda martyrs killed *in odium fidei* were the witnesses of a «new African civilization, centered on the Gospel»: a «legion of heroes provided by darkest Africa for its own redemption» who followed the example of their «missionaries, fathers and teachers» in the midst of xenophobic, anti-European tendencies – the same that troubled the «Arab and Negro world» shaken by decolonization a few decades later.[86] Benedict XV's beatification of Baganda Christians in 1920 was part of this palimpsest that codified black inferiority in terms of faith and culture, but made provision for the possibility of uplift through adherence to missionary evangelization. Even if one of the key-elements of such a discourse was the church disengagement from "immoderate" nationalist imperialism and the promotion of a native clergy, the cult of black martyrs of Uganda made sense within a theology of history which traced back the decadence of Africa to savagery resulting from the Muslim expansion. Infidelity had wiped out Christian feeling and consequently any glimmer of civilization. Hence the restoration of Christian society as preached by White Fathers was thought to be the only remedy for black barbarism and degeneration. It is no surprise then that Benedict XV held on to Islamophobic and homophobic stereotypes to blame Muslims both for the evil of the slave trade and the Buganda *kabaka* (king)'s supposed homosexual advances.

85. Ronald Kassimir, *Complex Martyrs: Symbols of Catholic Church Formation and Political Differentiation in Uganda*, in «African Affairs», 90/360 (1991), pp. 357-382.

86. I quote from Giuseppe Beduschi, *I martiri dell'Uganda*, Bologna, Editrice Nigrizia, 1961 (1st edition 1920), pp. 7-9.

Based on a literature which gained currency until the Second World War, and which perpetuated a colonial demonization of traditional African structures, the immediate cause of the execution of the young converts could be identified in their refusal to yield to the king's «unnatural vices», that is the «things of Sodom» which had been taught to him by Arab traders. So the Blessed martyrs were essentially identified as «confessors of the faith», but also and above all «martyrs of purity». Chastity, not race or color, was the original marker of their sainthood as promoted by European missionaries and the papacy, in devotional material too.[87]

Within Catholicism at the turn of the 20th century, a wider rhetoric recognized «something of the ancient pagans in the atrocities practiced in later times, and even in our day, by the Mohammedans in Africa» against «Negroes» carried into bondage in Africa «by Mussulman traders», as stated by American Josephite priest Joseph Butsch in 1917.[88] This view clearly underplayed white racism and violence, by giving the impression that black people suffering was not due to the harassment of white Christians of European descent. Against this background, it is likewise true that black martyrdom epitomized by Baganda victims was promoted by American black Catholics organized in the Federated Colored Catholics and later in the Interracial Councils movement as a way to affirm the dignity of the "Negro race", and the principle that «the Catholic Church does not look at the color of the skin».[89] In his groundbreaking book *Interracial Justice*, Father LaFarge mentioned the Blessed martyrs in order to reject racial prejudice based on biological hierarchy and stand up for the belief that «the Negro can show as many examples of glorious moral triumph over the weakness of fallen human nature as the member of any other racial

87. Un Missionario dei Padri Bianchi, *I Beati Martiri dell'Uganda (Seconda Edizione)*, Milano, Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere, 1936, p. 8. See also the holy image *Beati martiri dell'Uganda. Pregate per noi*, published in Turin by local White Fathers (s.d., but presumably around 1936: property of the author). On this topic see Michael Chapman, *Anglicans, the Ecumenism of Blood, and Postcolonial Problems*, in *Gathered in my Name. Ecumenism in the World Church*, ed. William Cavanaugh, Eugene (OR), Wipf and Stock, 2020, pp. 84-102 and Neville Wallace Hoad, *African Intimacies. Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 2007, chapter 1.

88. Joseph Butsch, *Catholics and the Negro*, in «The Journal of Negro History», 2/4 (1917), p. 394 [October].

89. Francis Cassilly, *From Uganda to Omaha. A Radio Address*, in «The Chronicle», 2/12 (1929), p. 10 [December].

group».[90] So did the «Interracial Review», which underlined the issue of a black-white common defense of the faith against ancient and modern paganism that united Christian missionaries and African converts as well as white priests and American black Catholics.[91] In the postwar period, Senegalese intellectual Alioune Diop, leader of the Catholic *négritude* movement and leading figure in francophone Pan-Africanism, referred to the scant appreciation of the Ugandan martyrs instead, together with the fact that they were not canonized yet, as the proof of a white God, «prisoner of European civilization».[92]

An important campaign for the martyrs' canonization was launched by U.S. White Fathers and supported by interracialists, in particular the Jesuit pastor of a black parish in Nebraska, Francis B. Cassilly. Cassilly had a fundamental role in spreading the cult of Uganda martyrs in the United States, as he urged a petition to the Holy See asking for an extension of the Feast of the Blessed Martyrs of Uganda to all churches and church institutions addressing the welfare of African Americans, so as to, firstly, provide them with a sound, Catholic way of "black religion" in the face of old and new Africanist Protestant denominations, and, secondly, mitigate the neglect and prejudice from white Catholics.[93] That did not mean that the «first Negro Africans to be declared saints in modern times»[94] became the emblem of antiracist mobilization calling for an end to segregation and racial discrimination. This did not happen until the 1960s at least, when Roman Catholicism, too, joined as a latecomer in the civil rights movement.

The transnational recasting of Ugandan black martyrdom did indeed find an outlet in the Vatican II *aggiornamento*. The enthusiastic media coverage offered by «Ebony» to the canonization of the martyrs on October

90. John LaFarge, *Interracial Justice. A Study of the Catholic Doctrine of Race Relations*, New York, America Press, 1937, pp. 35-36.

91. Henry Watts, *Uganda's Martyrs*, in «IR», 12/5 (1939), pp. 73-74 [May].

92. Alioune Diop, *On ne fabrique pas un peuple*, in «Présence africaine», 14 (1953), p. 13. See Elizabeth A. Foster, *African Catholic. Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2019, pp. 58-93.

93. Ronald LaMarr Sharps, *The Emergence of Black Cultural Expression in the Roman Catholic Liturgy*, M.A. dissertation, Washington (DC), The American University, 1985, pp. 53-54 and 93-100. Concerning the rise of the Black Church, see the concise contribution by Judith Weisenfeld, *Religion in African American History*, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.24.

94. *African Martyrs to Be Proclaimed Saints*, in «IR», 37/1 (1964), p. 6 [January].

18, 1964, during the third session of the Council, was a typical expression of the "ecumenical moment". In the eyes of the popular African American-focused magazine, this global event occurring as it did «before more than 2,000 bishops» openly emphasized «the stand of the Roman Catholic Church against racial discrimination».[95] «Ebony»'s photo reportage was deeply appreciated not only by black priests – one of them, the vice rector of St. Peter the Apostle College in Rome, Carlos A. Lewis, praised the «great message» of the rite «for all sincere believers in Christ […] in regard to better race-relations».[96] In an article written to celebrate the 20th anniversary of «Ebony», Langston Hughes chose significantly to juxtapose two covers communicating «at a glance the new roles Negroes play in today's world»: the «massed faces, Negro and white» of the crowd in the March on Washington on 1963, and «Pope Paul VI canonizing the Uganda Martyrs with the assistance of African Cardinal Laurean Rugambwa at a Pontifical Mass in St. Peter's».[97]

In spite of this mainstream interpretation, new saints' black icons remained controversial symbols, encompassing complex and ambivalent meanings. In his homily at the canonization and the speeches delivered during the 1969 apostolic journey in Uganda including the pilgrimage to the Martyrs Shrine in Namugongo – the first time a pope visited Africa –, Paul VI paid little attention to the issue of racial discrimination and antiblack racism, setting out his discourse with the following points: 1) the "ecumenism of blood", which means sharing martyrdom with another twenty-three Anglican converts; 2) the connection between black martyrdom and the foundation of a new «spiritual tradition», a «Christian and civil regeneration», «a civilization open to the superior expressions of the spirit and to superior forms of social life» replacing «a primitive civilization, not lacking in magnificent human values, but infected and weak and almost a slave of itself»;[98] 3) the invitation not to reduce Christian profession to a kind of «local folklore», or «exclusivist racism» or «arbitrary separatism», that is to remain sincerely

95. Era Bell Thompson, *Pope Confers Sainthood on 22 African Martyrs*, in «Ebony», 20/3 (1965), p. 30 [January]. A similar interpretation in *Vatican to Canonize 22 Negro Martyrs*, in «NYT», July 8, 1964, pp. 1 and 22.

96. *Letters*, in «Ebony», 20/7 (1965), p. 19 [May].

97. Langston Hughes, *Ebony's Nativity*, in «Ebony», 21/1 (1965), p. 41 [November].

98. [Paul VI], *In solemni canonizatione Beatorum Caroli Lwanga, Matthiae Mulumba Kalemba et viginti sociorum Martyrum Ugandensium*, in «Acta Apostolicae Sedis», 56/12 (1964), pp. 903-912.

African by «bringing to the Catholic Church the precious and original contribution of "negritude", which it particularly needs in this historic hour».[99] There is little doubt that black martyrdom typified by the first modern black African saints was not a straight call for racial justice, suggesting antiracist sainthood. The overall sense of Montini's pronouncements is noteworthy though. Paul VI claimed the role of the church was an «expert of humanity», in enhancing the true, postcolonial development of black peoples of Africa, who were considered to be needy and backward, but also a precious otherness compared to Western secularism and capitalist materialism. However, African spiritual treasures were seen in danger of degenerating into a reverse «racism» – it is remarkable that the only use of this term referred to black nationalism and separatism determined to erase any cultural influence of the white man, including the Western Christian tradition, while at the same time being at risk of falling «into the snares of other insidious enslavements»[100] (a false culture of liberation stemming from Marxist materialism). Blackophile humanitarianism did not untie the knot of the patronizing/civilizing attitude towards blackness. This is why the assessment on the sacrifice of Ugandan martyrs was challenged by certain sectors of the black nationalist movement, regarding them as "collaborators" of foreign agents and traitors of African heritage, to the point of considering the canonization a manifestation of colonial mentality.[101]

6. *Martyrs of racism*

The 1950s-1960s civil rights era represented a further pivotal piece in the jigsaw pattern of black martyrdom. To be precise, it was the memo-

99. Paul VI, *Eucharistic Celebration at the Conclusion of the Symposium Organized by the Bishops of Africa. Homily of Paul VI*, July 31, 1969, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/homilies/1969/documents/hf_p-vi_hom_19690731.html.

100. Paul VI, *Address of Paul VI to the Parliament of Uganda*, August 1, 1969, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1969/august/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19690801_parlamento-uganda.html. See Elizabeth Foster, *"Expert in Humanity". An African Vision for the Catholic Church*, in *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered*, eds. Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 223-237.

101. Kevin Ward, *Archbishop Janani Luwum. The Dilemmas of Loyalty, Opposition and Witness in Amin's Uganda*, in *Christianity and the African Imagination*, eds. David Maxwell and Ingrid Lawrie, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2013, p. 201.

rialization of the movement after the biennium 1964-1965, and above all in the period following the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., that established a master narrative in this respect too. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has remarked in an influential contribution, the civil rights movement «circulates through American memory in forms and through channels that are at once powerful, dangerous, and hotly contested». A dominant narrative which permeates pop culture and is «twisted by ideology and political contestation, and embedded in heritage tours, museums, public rituals, textbooks […] distorts and suppresses as much as it reveals».[102]

The trope of black martyrdom is no exception to this. It is part of a storytelling centered on a choral, noneconomic-oriented, triumphal march which culminated in the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act: a polite, nonviolent and Christian-based protest led by some saint-like heroes – one above all, Dr. King. According to this narrative, the movement's remarkable victory, reflected in both Kennedy's and Johnson's presidencies, is then followed by a season of decay and extremism, symbolized by urban riots, Black Power militancy and divisive affirmative action policies. During this phase, on the one hand African Americans turn their backs on Gundar Myrdal's "American creed", which is inherently antithetical to race prejudices, insofar as it is based on individualism, liberty, and equal opportunities.[103] On the other hand, the conservative backlash reaction finally puts an end to progressive demands, while paradoxically embracing – or twisting, depending on the point of view – the meritocratic, race-blind sentiments that the majority of civil rights activists championed against white supremacists.[104] The topic of black martyrs can be taken as a benchmark of the different phases through the public memory of racial violence and black liberation as intertwined phenomena shaped the so-called postracial age: that is, the age which was marked by the retreat of scientific racism and the rise of a generic antiracist consensus under the auspices of the United Nations initiatives, dating back to the 1965 *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*.

102. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past*, in «The Journal of American History», 91/4 (2005), pp. 1233-1263.

103. Stanford M. Lyman, *Gunnar Myrdal's "An American Dilemma" after a Half Century: Critics and Anticritics*, in «International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society», 12/2 (1998), pp. 327-389.

104. Randall Kennedy, *For Discrimination. Race, Affirmative Action, and the Law*, New York, Random House, 2013.

The pantheon of «martyrs for black freedom» can be regarded as a starting point, as suggested by «Ebony» in 1975. The eclectic selection of personalities made by the popular magazine for African Americans shows an all-encompassing choice in terms of chronology, religious-political sensibilities and color. Among the «countless martyrs for the cause of black dignity», «uncompromising in their opposition to racial oppression», and activists who made «supreme sacrifice while advancing the liberation struggle», the pride of place was given to King, immortalized by his iconic photograph in which he waves to supporters at the National Mall during the March on Washington: an image that over time has become the symbol of an ecumenical and non-radical Martin, "frozen" in his 1963 emotional *I have a dream speech*. «Ebony»'s pantheon of people killed «by white men who also believed in God» was nonetheless varied. It comprised John Brown, «Nat Turner and the unnamed victims of lynchers», integrationist civil rights activists such as Lamar Smith, George Lee and Medgar Evers, but also Malcolm X and other figures belonging to the universe of black radicalism and Black Power that opposed liberal integrationism by mixing revolutionary nationalism, separatism, anti-imperialism, and advocating the use of violence/armed self-resistance against racist harassment and police misconduct, such as Black Panther Party activists George Jackson and Fred Hampton, who drew on Marxist Leninism. Varying deaths were pieced together in a painful *continuum* calling for racial justice: the thousands of «martyrs» by lynching who had been guilty of trivial offences, or simply being «uppity» or «too prosperous»; the 1950s-1960s civil rights campaigners; the four little girls killed by the 1963 Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, because of the use of the black congregation as a meeting place for African American activists; finally, the black nationalists and the Panthers killed in detention, police raids or attacks, whose deaths were described as political assassinations under the U.S. government direction.[105] In the mid-1970s, the media hype of these episodes of overt repression (Hampton was killed at home as he slept) were able to still raise a wave of indignation and empathy among moderate public opinion and liberal Christian whites: even in those opposing to a radical ideology looking at black movement as an anti-

105. *Martyrs of Black Liberation*, in *The Bicentennial: 200 Years of Black Trials and Triumphs*, special issue of «Ebony», 30/10 (1975), pp. 138-142 [August].

colonial fight in alliance with other anti-imperialist struggles, particularly the Vietnamese resistance.[106]

Now move to 1989, when the Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama, was inaugurated, as the first monument of that kind commemorating the movement, in the city traditionally considered its birthplace. The black-granite memorial was designed by the same creator of the Vietnam Veteran Memorial in Washington, DC, Maya Lin. Inscribed on it are the names of forty individuals killed during the classic periodization between 1954 (*Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* landmark sentence of the U.S. Supreme Court on school desegregation) and April 4, 1968 (the date of Dr. King's assassination). The «martyrs» to be paid homage to are overwhelmingly African Americans; seven of them are white, like the Catholic and later Unitarian activist Viola Liuzzo. Victims were selected so as to fit at least one of three criteria: 1) they were murdered because they were active in the movement; 2) they were killed by organized white supremacist terrorist acts; or, 3) their death «helped to galvanized the movement by demonstrating the brutality faced by African Americans in the South».[107] This is the case of the four girls killed in Birmingham, whose death was enshrined by King's powerful eulogy calling them «victims of one of the most vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetrated against humanity», and «martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity».[108] In more recent times, the «martyrs of Birmingham» joined the list of Catholic unofficial saints to be memorialized as those who responded «in the spirit of Christ to the needs of their time and thereby opened a path for others to follow». In the eyes of Robert Ellsberg, (editor-in-chief of Maryknoll's Orbis Books, which traditionally focused on social and racial justice, pacifism and liberation theology), the «Birmingham strug-

106. Joshua Bloom, Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Black against Empire. The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party*, Berkley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 2013.

107. So according to J. Richard Cohen, president of the Southern Poverty Law Center from 1986 to 2019: *Emmett Till Unsolved Civil Rights Crime Act. Joint Hearing [...]. First Session on H.R. 923. June 12, 2007. Serial No. 110-31*, Washington (DC), U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007, pp. 53-57.

108. Martin Luther King Jr., *Eulogy for the Martyred Children (1963)*, in *A Testament of Hope. The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Washington, New York, HarperCollins, 1986, pp. 221-222.

gle» was «literally a battle between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness».[109]

This is also the case of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old Chicagoan boy lynched in 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman when visiting his relatives in Mississippi. His case highlights a non-linear evolution in public remembrance, as well as the importance of the 1980s breakthrough in terms of the rise of colorblind antiracism as a pop/political mass culture, being much more mainstream than countercultural. As is known, the decision of Till's mother, Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley, to have an open-casket funeral and to allow brutal pictures of her son's mutilated body appear in the media in order to shock public opinion, acted as a «catalyst» of the civil rights mobilization. However, during the 1960s and the 1970s the collective memory of this terrible episode faded away. A revival of Emmett Till as a "martyr" took place only in the mid-1980s, when the story of the black teenager entered antiracist cultural industry in all respects.[110]

This shift is evident in the Catholic culture too, which for a long time maintained a low profile about Till's black martyrdom, despite mainline magazines such as «Commonweal» judging «with shame and revulsion what had happened» as it «took racism out the textbooks and editorials and showed it to the world».[111] The charge against the black boy – flirting with a (white) married woman – may have had some weight in the Church's silence on his martyrdom.[112] A number of liberal Catholic opinion makers have recently embraced such a rhetoric in support of BLM, by celebrating Emmett as a martyr and his «faithful mother» as «the saint we need in the fight for racial justice», and also promoting their sacralization through holy pictures, thus making a distorting analogy between the horrors of the past

109. Robert Ellsberg, *Blessed Among Us. Day by Day with Saintly Witnesses*, Collegeville (MN), Liturgical Press, 2016, pp. xxii and 552-553.

110. Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Resurrecting Emmett Till: The Catalyst of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, in «Journal of Black Studies», 29/2 (1998), pp. 179-188. See also Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till. The Murder That Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*, Jackson (MS), University Press of Mississippi, 2015.

111. Stephen J. Whitfield, *In the Delta. The Story of Emmett Till*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 45-46.

112. Silence now interrupted: Wilton Gregory, Archbishop of Washington, DC, and the first Black American to be named a Cardinal recalled his participation to Till's wake when he was a child as a vivid memory. *Cardinal Wilton Gregory Remembers Emmett Till's Wake*, November 12, 2020, https://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/cardinal-wilton-gregory-remembers-emmett-tills-wake/.

racial atrocities and present antiblack police violence. U.S. Jesuit magazine «America», for instance, sponsored Sandra Hansen's *Emmett Till Memorial Tryptic*, an altarpiece displayed in 2011 at the Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan (the most important liberal and non-denominational congregation in the United States). This artwork is illustrative of a popularized, now largely commonsense connection between the trope of black martyrdom and the master narrative of the civil rights movement. It depicts Emmett as Christ, and Mamie Elizabeth as the Virgin Mary in three panels: the crucifixion (the lynching), the *Pietà* (the mother mourning the hideously disfigured son), and the resurrection. In this panel, the civil rights movement symbolically springs from the river of people attending Emmett's funeral, turning evil into good, death into life. The new beginning is embodied by the portraits of some distinguished activists and personalities, including the first African American associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Thurgood Marshall and Stokely Carmichael – remembered here not as the Black Power prophet, but for being a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. When the tryptic is closed, images of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King introduce the worshipper into the new world born after the end of segregated society.[113] The self-reassuring message of the altarpiece complies with a nonconflictual, optimistic, race-neutral discourse centered on the soundness of the American dream and the perception of racism – in its segregationist, terroristic and white supremacist form – as a national trauma belonging to the "old" world, a past to be recalled in order to prevent it from happening again. Here we see also the hegemony of the victim paradigm based on Christian suffering and the experiencing of pain as a way to overcome societal lacerations and political divisions left by the unilateral war declared by white racists against African Americans.

To come back to the Montgomery memorial, this offers a reductionist vision of black liberation by assuming the civil rights movement, increasingly perceived in the 1980s as morally right by the majority of white people too, as a national narrative excluding the «Black radical tradition» associated with Malcolm X, black nationalists, and the Black Panthers.[114] That shrine

113. Carolyn Alessio, *Why Has Chicago Failed to Honor the Grave of Emmet [*sic*] Till?*, in «America», December 5, 2016, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2016/12/05/why-has-chicago-failed-honor-grave-emmet-till. See also https://www.sandra-hansen.com/emmett-till-memorial-triptych.html.

114. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Chapel Hill (NC), University of North Carolina Press, 2016 (1st edition 1983).

of remembrance harbors a redemptive ideal with conservative implications. Like the other Maya Lin memorials, it repackages «the difficult, the divisive, and the controversial» legacy of the "long 1960s" into «loci of popular satisfaction and conciliation». This is linked, for example, to the simplistic and exculpatory idea that the movement was rooted in Judeo-Christian ethics of love, brotherhood, and equal opportunity for prosperity at the core of inclusive American civil religion, as suggested by the monument's concept idea: a passage of King's memorable *I have a dream* speech, «Until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream», an indirect biblical reference to Amos 5:24.[115] As summarized by «Ebony», the martyrs died precisely «for a just cause, for the simple belief that Blacks and Whites could enjoy the American Dream as equals».[116]

Martin Luther King Jr. was, in fact, the saintly hero who happened to personify a compensatory narrative of racial reconciliation and redemptive suffering, opposed to the antagonistic calls for racial justice: in other words, a message of Christian moral tension contrary to the confrontational cry of "Black Power". Even though King spoke as a black American, his death has become the archetypal martyrdom for a cause transcending race: one of a society judging people «not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character», to quote him. The confident belief in a nation to be redeemed by ecumenical faith and humanism sounded very distant from Malcolm X's critique of Christianity as inherently affected by the idolatry of whiteness. Yet historiography demonstrated how the antithesis between Dr. King's colorblind and liberal integrationist dream and Malcolm X's image of America as a «nightmare» of injustices from which blacks had to free themselves uncompromisingly, should be nuanced.[117] This dichotomy was partly the result of the creation of a domesticated image of Dr. King in the early 1980s, allowing the endorsement of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, later established by Ronald Reagan in 1983 as a national holiday. It is well known how right-wing commentators, and conservative African Americans, weaponized King's icon-making against black protest and affirmative action policies by manipulating the legacy of the civil rights movement. The black pastor has been placed in the civil-religious pantheon of

115. Daniel Abramson, *Maya Lin and the 1960s: Monuments, Time Lines, and Minimalism*, in «Critical Inquiry», 22/4 (1996), pp. 690-691 and 705.

116. *Remembering the Martyrs of the Movement*, in «Ebony», 45/4 (1990), p. 58.

117. James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America. A Dream or a Nightmare*, Maryknoll (NY), Orbis Books, 1991.

American great men at the cost of using his aura to let people believe that they live in a postracial society with his commitment to social rights, anti-poverty programs, anti-capitalist and anti-militarist demands removed.[118] However, it should be said that this process has been more complex than it looks. Predominantly white Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, played an important role in constructing King's martyrdom as the quintessential avatar of black martyrdom.[119]

Paul VI set an important cultural frame at the same time that the murder of the Baptist pastor boosted a strong emotional adherence to the utopia of racial equality in conjunction with the expectations of 1968. The semi-official Vatican newspaper «L'Osservatore Romano» celebrated King's religious sacrifice. During Palm Sunday Mass, the pope openly connected the Passion of Jesus with the memorial of the «Christian preacher of the human and civil promotion of his Negro people», wishing that his «spiritually valuable» blood would inspire in black communities a spirit of reconciliation, instead of violence and revenge. Montini focused on the overcoming of «racial struggles» failing to mention white racism, though. The fascination of the Catholic popular opinion with King's martyrial myth took shape as a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, which church leaders directed against black radical movements immediately after the Memphis assassination. In general, King's positive nonviolent dream to «achieve racial integration with peaceful methods» was set against a negative, Black Power "guerrilla" agenda inciting violence in the ghettos, spreading Marxist tendencies in youth protest, and undermining social cohesion.[120]

In the American scenario, Catholics interpreted King's death within an ecumenical frame that made race "invisible". The «National Catholic Reporter» – an independent Catholic newspaper founded in 1964 under

118. *The Domestication of Martin Luther King Jr. Clarence B. Jones, Right-Wing Conservatism, and the Manipulation of the King Legacy*, eds. Lewis V. Baldwin and Rufus Burrow Jr., Eugene (OR), Cascade Books, 2013; Massimo Rubboli, *"Now That He Is Safely Dead": The Construction of the Myth of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)*, in «Americana. E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary», 5/1 (2009), http://americanaejournal.hu/vol5no1/rubboli.

119. Scott W. Hoffman, *The Overlooked Canonization of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, in« Religion and American Culture. A Journal of Interpretation», 10/2 (2000), pp. 123-148.

120. *Paolo VI invita le schiere giovanili tutti i cristiani e l'intera famiglia umana a rivivere il pacifico trionfo ed attuare gli insegnamenti del Figlio di Dio*, in «L'Osservatore Romano», April 8-9, 1968, p. 1.

the stimulus of Vatican II *aggiornamento* – published a letter by Sulpician theologian Father Robert Bryan, launching an appeal to proclaim King «the patron saint of American Christianity», just like Patrick in Ireland or Stephen in Hungary. As «a great American martyr», said the text, King personified «the authentic goodness of the American dream», being: a «great prophet» leading his people according to «the principles of brotherly love, evangelical forbearance, and Christian courage»; a loyal supporter of democracy and equality enshrined by the U.S. Constitution; a «Negro» who «loved men of every color», and although hated and scorned, «preached peace and non-violence».[121] Interracialists fostered a liturgical mobilization through widespread memorial services in which Catholic ministers eulogized Dr. King «as a saint, a martyr and a great American citizen», always willing to suffer and die to «bring equality and justice for every human being».[122]

The making of "Saint Martin" was part of a global process. While U.S. liberal white Catholics emphasized his interdenominational type of martyrdom, the "Religious Left" sprinkled their radical and anti-imperialist interpretations of King's civil-religious sainthood with the countercultural spirit of 1968 on both sides of the Atlantic. In Italy, for instance, Leftist Catholics such as Father Ernesto Balducci had a pivotal role in the construction of Dr. King as a revolutionary martyr and apostle of racial liberation. The antiracist acculturation in his name came to fruition under a non-conformist, anti-imperialist, anti-war and anti-bourgeois framework that subsumed King's apostolate in the perspective of renewal nourished by Vatican II and the 1960s protest, founded on the advocacy of conscientious objection and the militant choice of siding with those oppressed by a capitalist and consumerist system. In publications and prayers organized by the *comunità di base* ("grassroot communities") like the Isolotto dissenting community in Florence, King's nonviolent struggle could be placed side by side with other stakeholders of a worldwide revolution against Western affluent society: Vietnamese resistance, Che Guevara's and Camilo Torres's guerrilla actions, or Malcolm X, Carmichael, and black armed groups advocating

121. Robert Bryan, *A Saint for All Christian*, in «National Catholic Reporter», May 1, 1968, p. 4.

122. In the words, for instance, of the chaplain of the Waterbury Catholic Interracial Council, Connecticut: *Memorial Services Widespread for Dr. King*, in «The Catholic Transcript», April 12, 1968, p. 6.

violent self-defense against police repression.[123] This comparison also applies to the French May 1968 climate. It is significant that a book series by the Paris Éditions universitaires, titled *Les justes* ("The righteous"), hosted an instant-book by Le Réunion-based historian Hubert Gerbeau, released in October 1968 and devoted to Dr. King as the apostle of pacifist nonviolence and Third World liberation ("Black Gandhi"). This work would be followed by other biographical profiles of Lenin, Che Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh. And it is interesting to note that it was translated in Italian by the Catholic publisher Cittadella, located in Assisi. Even if the next titles of the series never saw the light of day in Italy, a passage of Gerbeau's book summarized King's "righteousness" in this way: «Wanting justice, peace and love – does this mean being Communist? Then yes, pastor King is a Communist. Like heroes and saints…».[124]

In the United States, Catholic Worker Movement activist Dorothy Day portrayed King in Christological terms referring to the minister's blood «shed for whites and black alike». The analogy with Good Friday was intended to claim King's faith in the Gospel of fraternal love and nonviolence not as a tactic, but as an overall anti-war and anti-capitalist criticism of the American model.[125] Above all else, the religious impact of the assassination of Martin Luther King formed the basis for the birth of a racial conscious Black Catholic Movement organized in the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, whose 1968 milestone statement represented an unprecedented frontal attack on Catholic hierarchy, a drastic disavowal of the interracialist hope of racial differences, giving way to a Christian, universal identity, and a much more impressive endorsement of black armed self-defense: «The Catholic Church in the United States, primarily a white racist institution, has addressed itself primarily to white society and is definitely part of that society».[126] In this context King's symbolic legacy was enhanced by black priests influenced by Black theology, and the sharing of the belief that Black Power was not the antithesis of Christianity, but its 20th century fulfillment. In particular, the Chicago case of Father George Clements

123. Matteo Caponi, *Antirazzismo cattolico e questione nera nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra*, in «Italia contemporanea», 297 bis (2021), pp. 17-54.

124. Hubert Gerbeau, *Martin Luther King*, Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 1969, p. 70 (French original edition: Paris, Éditions Universitaires, 1968).

125. Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage*, in «The Catholic Worker», 34/4 (1968), p. 1 [April].

126. Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*, p. 258.

received national attention, since it made King's sainthood a reason for the conflict between the black Catholic community and the local archbishop Cardinal John Patrick Cody. Clements – one of the prominent figures of American Black Catholicism, known as the "chaplain" of Chicago Black Panthers – had taken part in the 1963 March on Washington, seeing «Christ in Martin Luther King».[127] In April 1968, after holding a requiem Mass for Dr. King at the black church of St. Dorothy, Clements and Father Richard F. Morrisroe – a white priest wounded in 1965 by a segregationist because of his civil rights commitment in Alabama, in the same shootout that took the life of Episcopalian seminarian Jonathan Daniels – announced the start of «a campaign to have Dr. King, a Baptist, canonized by the Catholic Church».[128] «I am hoping that people will let me know of any miracles that have occurred because they prayed to Saint Martin Luther King», the black priest claimed.[129]

Clements's advocacy of King's martyrdom fell under a black nationalist activism which was the immediate cause of his removal from St. Dorothy, and resulted in one of many sensational episodes of controversies in 1968 in which local congregations defied church authorities and supported their supposedly reckless pastors by boycotting the new appointees. Liturgy and sacred ornaments were two typical ways to get the message of protest across. In one of the so-called Black Unity Masses, a prayer was said asking God that «we might recognize Our blackness as a thing of pride and beauty», that «Archbishop Cody might soon come to understand *our Black thing*», and finally that «Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. might be recognized as a saint by all Black People».[130] Clement carried out other iconoclastic antiracist liturgical actions inspired by a dissenting political faith after he was made pastor of the Holy Angels church. Among his first steps was the rededication of a side altar to Dr. King as the «Shrine of St. Martin Luther King Jr.», by replacing the image of St. Anthony of Padua with a portrait of the Protestant minister: an act that Cody labelled as being sacrilegious. The militancy of the Holy Angels parish also expressed itself in hosting a

127. *Christ Would Use King's Methods If Here Today*, in «Jet», 24/21 (1963), pp. 56-57 [September 12].

128. *Start Drive to Have Dr. King Canonized*, in «Jet», 34/2 (1968), p. 25 [April 18].

129. *King's Canonization Urged*, in «NYT», April 9, 1968, p. 37.

130. Matthew J. Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic. The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration*, New York, New York University Press, 2017, pp. 116-142 and 165-166.

memorial service for Panther leader Hampton and later decided to commission «The Wall of Black Saints», a mural depicting non-Catholic martyrs of black liberation including Hampton, Dr. King, Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and the «Jackson State martyrs» (the students murdered by police during an anti-war demonstration in 1970). Clements justified this choice by saying: «We are black before we are Catholic».[131]

Martin Luther King was informally canonized in other Catholic places of worship. Suffice it to mention that St. Cecilia parish in Detroit, Michigan became newsworthy in 1968 for the unveiling of a new painting in the apse by Devon Cunningham, portraying a Black Christ surrounded by multiracial angels and accompanied by clouds of heaven from which «Mahatma Gandhi and Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, the two Kennedy brothers and Pope John XXIII» appeared, under the motto «We Shall Overcome!» (the theme song of the civil rights movement). The artwork, to which «Ebony» devoted a famous cover, was commissioned by pastor Raymond Ellis, an admirer of Malcolm X as «a convert to the universal cause of brotherhood of men» and an advocate of «the right Black Power» that «may not degenerate into black futility or fragment itself in hate»: that is, via Dr. King, an emotional feeling of racial solidarity which was required to confront the white power system.[132]

7. *Conclusion: from black to ecumenical?*

Dr. King's indirect or outspoken canonization both as a Christian and civil saint magnetized, and almost incorporated, the multifaceted meanings of black martyrdom layered in popular imagination over decades. In the aftermath of the 1960s turmoil, King's afterlife was fashioned by the antiracist discourse into a solid pattern. However, besides the fact that black martyrdom gained generalized respectability and entered the mainstream in the name of "Holy Martin", it should be noted that King himself was the subject of the

131. Jack Slater, *The School that Beat the Odds. Militant Holy Angels in Chicago Demonstrates Black Parent Power*, in «Ebony», 28/7 (1973), pp. 66 and 72 [May]. See Cressler, *Authentically Black*, p. 153.

132. See *St. Cecilia Parish. Detroit, Michigan*, Hackensack (NJ), Custombook Inc., 1972, pp. 14 and 35 and Alex Poinsett, *The Quest for a Black Christ. Radical Clerics Reject "Honky Christ" Created by American Culture-religion*, in «Ebony», 24/5 (1969), pp. 170-172 [March].

flipping transition from antiracism as a countercultural language shared by minorities to antiracism as a cultural product legitimized by church hierarchies and state institutions. Before his death, King's reputation in U.S. white Christians and white Catholics was that of a dangerous agitator fed by "black rage", on a par with Malcolm X; according to 1966 Gallup's polls, only 33% of Americans thought favorably of him. What allowed the pervasive rise of his myth in pop culture, from minority circles, the Black Church and militant black Catholics, was the 1980s shift of his public image «from outlaw to saint». The "Negro revolutionary", warning against the triplet of racism, poverty and militarism, was transformed into the moderate, meek, peaceful and non-threatening social reformer we all know today: a champion of racial harmony calling for brotherly love and compromise. By 1987, with 76% of whites rating him positively, he was «palatable to all».[133] A key factor in this transformation was the cultural decline in the appeal of political violence as a means of radical social-political change, and the crisis of the very idea of revolution, in favor of the rise of a non-violent semantics.

Furthermore, the cult of King's martyrdom that was institutionalized by the Martin Luther King Jr. Day largely framed racism in the past, as a relic of white supremacist ideology and the remains of a society where black people were separate and unequal, far from the ongoing course of the American dream – which King adhered to.[134] Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, contributed to this conservative, self-gratulatory rationale. During his apostolic journey of 1987 to the United States, John Paul II embraced the colorblind interpretation of Dr. King's «providential role», distant from both the "Red" and "Black" Martin characterization. On that occasion, the pope stated that: 1) Christian liberation could not be identified with black liberation, nor Black Power; 2) King's nonviolent apostolate could be the only model for Catholics; 3) «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 blacks, whites, Americans, every culture and race», that is to say that «black cultural heritage *enriches* [italics mine] the Church».[135]

133. Jason Sokol, *The Heavens Might Crack. The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.*, New York, Basic Books, 2018, chapter 7.

134. Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History. The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2018.

135. John Paul II, *Meeting with the Black Catholic Community of New Orleans*, September 12, 1987, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870912_cattolici-new-orleans.html.

American Catholics have been supporting King's sacralization as an element of the U.S. civil religion. This has resulted in memorial services, vigil prayers, and Masses for the Martin Luther King federal holiday. More than any other pope, Francis has held up the Baptist minister as a source of inspiration for a world built on universal brotherhood and «fraternal love»,[136] and honored MLK Day assuming Martin as the symbol of the never-ending American dream «of harmony and equality for all people, attained through nonviolent and peaceful means»[137] (a dream of «liberty in plurality and non-exclusion»).[138] Even though a comprehensive study on this topic still needs to be carried out, we can assume that the Catholic Church has headed towards a "minimalist", unofficial endorsement of King-style black martyrdom, while contributing to make it a normative prototype of a sound antiracist commitment. This means incorporating King in liturgies, despite some tensions and accommodations. Of course, King was not a Roman Catholic and consequently cannot be a canonized saint. So Catholics have not been venerating him as a truly rightful martyr, as they do for saints in their liturgical calendar – contrary to Lutherans and Episcopalians, who included him respectively as a «renewer of society, martyr», and «Civil Rights Leader».[139] But Catholic congregations have been honoring King's legacy likewise in dedicated religious services anyway, recommending for imitation his exemplary testimony. As mentioned before, the custom of placing a picture of Martin Luther King inside the churches has raised controversy, as it appears in some people's eyes to be a *de facto* violation of canons 1186-1187 of the Code of Canon Law concerning sacred images (no liturgical veneration may be attributed to non-Catholics). Here too, we find a recurring, thorny issue that applies to BLM-style religious rites.

136. Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, October 3, 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html; Id., *Amoris laetitia*, March 19, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, pp. 88-90.

137. Francis, *Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Bernice King on the Occasion of "Martin Luther King Jr. Day"*, January 18, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201203_lettera-bernice-king.html.

138. Francis, *Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress. Address of the Holy Father*, September 24, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.

139. Hoffman, *The Overlooked Canonization*, pp. 138-139.

A theological response to this conundrum has been given by an expanded interpretation of martyrdom in the spirit of ecumenism, intended in the wider meaning of "witness" of those who died for their sincerely held belief, even if belonging to other denominations and lacking church official approval (in the form of beatification or canonization, as concerns Roman Catholicism). The broadening of the category of martyrdom so that it includes not just martyrs *in odium fidei* but also martyrs of action, justice and solidarity, in adherence with Christian moral teaching and in conflict with contemporary social attitudes and political powers, was carried out for the first time with the 1982 visit of John Paul II to the Anglican Canterbury Cathedral. On that occasion, different church representatives gathered in the Chapel of Saints and Martyrs of Our Own Time, and provided six examples of sainthood «transcending denominations – Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Janani Luwum, Maria Skobtsova, Martin Luther King, and Oscar Romero». Behind this cutting-edge act was a self-absolving pattern. I refer to the idea that the 20th century had produced more martyrs than any preceding age, «in the concentration camps of the Nazis, the Soviet religious persecutions and assassinations all over the world».[140] By celebrating Christian witnesses belonging to various denominations, churches presented themselves as being united in victimhood, as being the targets of a bloody and merciless persecution driven by a secularized, Godless modernity. This de-contextualized rhetoric allowing Christian communities to wash their hands of any past responsibility in 20th century wrongs, including antiblack racism, was proposed again in 1998, when a statue of Dr. King was placed above the western door to Westminster Abbey in London among the modern martyrs including Romero and Bonhoeffer. At the service of the unveiling of the statues, Canon Anthony Harvey said that King «combined an explicitly Christian language of freedom and justice with an appeal to American democracy», and was the «obvious» choice for «inclusion in a collection of contemporary Christian leaders who suffered violent death».[141] There was not a word about racism and the complicity of the churches in white supremacy.

140. Gordon S. Wakefield, *Martyrdom, Martyrs*, in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, London, SCM Press, 1983, pp. 260-261. See Lundberg, *Christian Martyrdom and Christian Violence*, pp. 7-15.

141. *Britain Honors Martin Luther King, Jr. With Statue at Westminster Abbey*, in «Jet», 94/13 (1998), p. 11 [August 24].

The “New Martyrs” Commission, established by John Paul II with the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 in mind, and so having the task of commemorating the thousands of believers who had distinguished themselves for holiness of life and love of their neighbors, and suffered persecution by the «new Caesars» (Communism, National Socialism, and the «idolatry of state and race» – a definition in continuity with the reductionist condemnation of racism in its Nazi-style, pagan form), adopted a similar approach.[142] The bull of Indiction of the Jubilee specified the memory of the martyrs, «especially because of Nazism, Communism, and racial or tribal conflicts» as a pivotal drive towards the re-Christianization of secular society.[143] Despite any official, canonical recognition of King’s martyrdom, the black minister was indicated by the Vatican as being one of «the martyrs and exemplary confessors of faith, hope and charity» to be memorialized beyond confessional boundaries.[144] and King’s name was then included in the list sent by the U.S. bishops’ committee to the Vatican Commission. Ten years before, his cause had been advocated by French scholar of Black theology and editor of «La Croix» Bruno Chenu. In a Catholic proposal for an ecumenical martyrology, Chenu categorized the Baptist pastor essentially as a defender of human dignity, and like Romero as a pioneer in the fight «for the essential rights of the oppressed» with the peaceful means of «active non-violence», standing up «against powers which, though they claim to be Christian, have perverted that Christian reference».[145] Even if John Paul II did not explicitly mention him at the Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith in the Twentieth Century held in May 2000, Martin Luther King Jr. was portrayed in the *Icon of the New Martyrs* commissioned by Wojtyła for the Basilica of St. Bartholomew on Tiber Island in Rome, dedicated to the cult of Christian witnesses under the title

142. Giovanni Marchesi, *La commemorazione ecumenica dei testimoni della fede*, in «La Civiltà Cattolica», 151/2 (2000), pp. 598-607.

143. John Paul II, *Incarnationis Mysterium*, November 29, 1998, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/hf_jp-ii_doc_30111998_bolla-jubilee_en.html.

144. Ecumenical Commission of the Central Committee of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, *The Holy Spirit and the Ecumenism. Letter to National Committees for the Year 1998*, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01091997_p-49_en.html.

145. Bruno Chenu, Claude Prud’homme, France Qúeré, Jean-Claude Thomas, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, London, SMC Press, 1990, pp. 163 and 183-188 (French original edition: Paris, Éditions du Centurion, 1988).

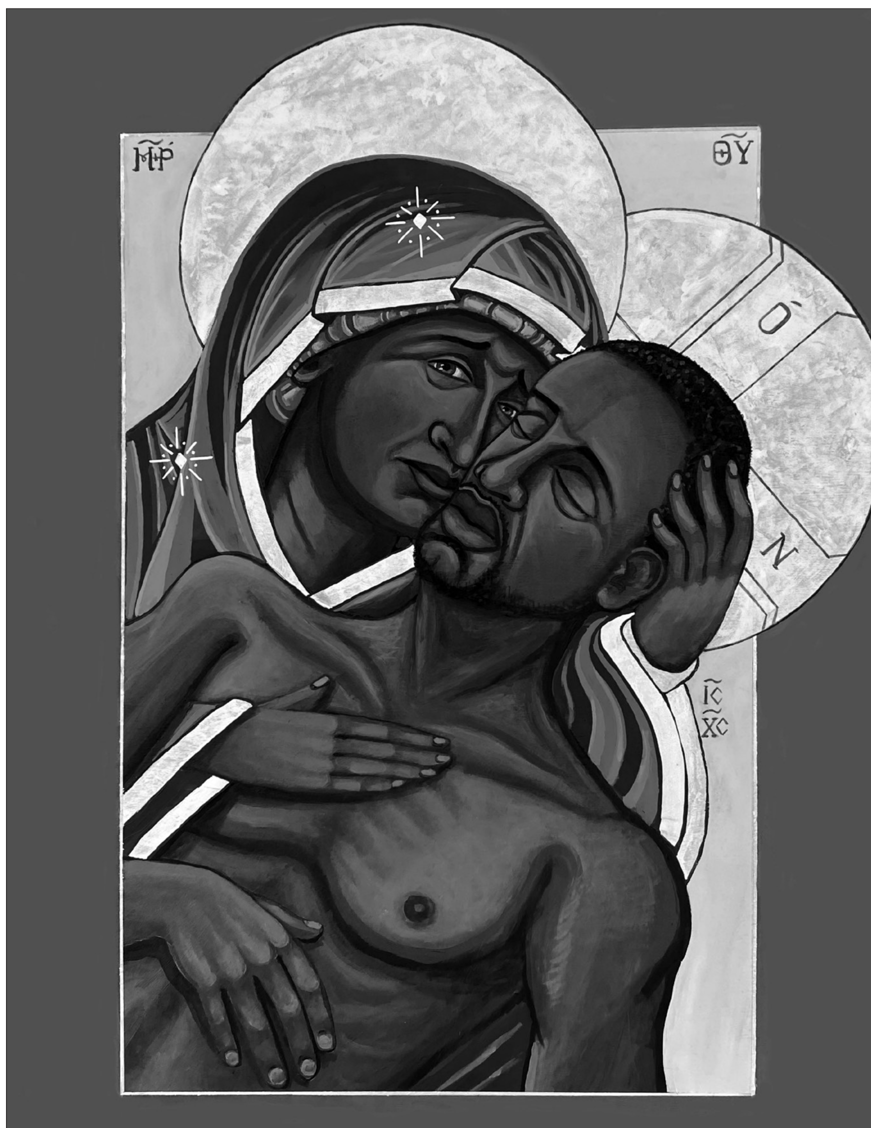
of «Shrine of the New Martyrs». The black pastor is there shown in the company of other Christian ministers killed for their commitment to social justice; these included: Romero, Juan José Gerardi and Pino Puglisi.[146]

Ultimately, this gradual endorsement of black martyrdom by mainline Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, remained contradictory. One of the major ironies is the race-neutral use of King's martyrdom as an instrument for raising awareness about the anti-Christian nature of racial violence, prejudice and racial discrimination, without unambiguously mobilizing Christian and Catholic communities against them. King's black martyrdom has acted both as a normative and reductionist antiracist model, which not only excluded the confrontational perspective of black liberation/ Black Power, but also reiterated an exculpatory point of view according to which racial atrocities, hatred and persecution are to be traced back to processes of de-Christianization and, in the end, secularization (positing Christian cultures and communities as victims, not as actors of antiblack racism). Furthermore, the trajectory of black martyrdom in public discourse confirms the weakness of countercultural interpretations in the face of the strength of a Christian-like redemptive paradigm. This latter emphasizing the innocent victimhood of extreme violence as a standalone element disconnected not only from any use of violence to achieve justice – e.g., revolutionary violence –, but also from the issues of social equality and social conflict, actually imposing a de-politicized model of martyrdom by which the only authentic response to violence lies in the acceptance of suffering and death as a nonviolent form of resistance. Lastly, current color-conscious antiracist movements calling for political action have relaunched militant black martyrdom after its "whitewashing", but also ironically fashioned a paradoxical divide between identity politics goals and the underlying of a set of symbols used to mobilize emotions and channel political feelings. This system of meanings is still shaped by some well-established frames – the lynching frame, and partly the civil rights movement master narrative – whose core theme has not been black empowerment. Hence there lies the risk of remaining suspended in webs of significance of the past, spun on other premises and objectives, with the side effect of trivializing some categories (white supremacy for instance),

146. Timothy George, *The Reformation and the New Ecumenism*, in *Protestantism after 500 Years*, eds. Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll, New York, Oxford University Press 2016, p. 330.

far beyond their narrower historical meaning,[147] and making them a generically extensive tool. Basically, this is a blunt rhetorical device, and not so effective in understanding and combating the specificity of contemporary racist phenomena.

147. George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy. A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981.



1. Kelly Latimore, *Mama*, 2020. Gouache and gold leaf on board, 36×48 in. https://kelly-latimoreicons.com/.

2. Ade Bethune, *"What You Have Done to the Least of These You Have Done to Me"*. Drawing published in «Interracial Review», 9/9 (1937), p. 136. Courtesy of the William D. Walsh Family Library at Rose Hill, Fordham University.

3. Richmond Barthé, *The Mother*, 1934. Painted plaster, life-size (destroyed). Photo from «Interracial Review», 9/7 (1939), p. 108. Courtesy of the William D. Walsh Family Library at Rose Hill, Fordham University.