

White Privilege Through the Lenses of the Five Silences and Marianist Mindfulness

by Maureen Hoock

White privilege is alive and well—in St. Louis, where I live, and throughout our country. It is found in families, communities, parishes, and beyond. Whether or not we are aware of privilege that often accompanies being white has little to do with its existence, but it definitely limits our ability to do anything about it. White privilege refers to a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others.¹ In *Laudato si*, Pope Francis speaks of the importance of human dignity and equality for the common good and the destructive nature found in a society devoid of these qualities..

But we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.²

In *Growing in the Virtues of Jesus*, Father Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, talks about how, from the time we are born, our egos begin to form and shape who we are. “Our ego makes deceptive demands which often keep us from feeling and acting the way our true self wants us to feel and act.... Our ego is largely unconscious; we are generally unaware of what it demands and how it is influencing us.”³ Hakenewerth goes on to talk about virtue as an ability within us to do what is right, that needs to be worked out and developed—like doing bicep curls to get a bigger Popeye muscle. The basic virtues (preparation virtues) are the Five Silences. Like the Boy Scouts’ motto, “Be prepared,” these preparation virtues give us a basic skill set; at any moment, we have the tools and skills to know what is right and to do it. It is not a “one-and-done” kind of preparation. Just as professionals take continuing education classes to keep their skills sharp, we must continually exercise these virtues so that we are ready to use them whenever we need them.

There are several books written on the System of Virtues and the Five Silences, so we will only use short descriptions of them here, just to help define these lenses. *Silence of words* is not only about the words we should not say but also about the times it might be difficult to speak up. We also must use our words to stand up for what is right and good. “This virtue empowers us to speak from our inner truth, even though initially we may fear the immediate reaction of others.”⁴ The maxim “actions speak louder than words” helps us to understand the concept of *silence of signs*. It is the look on our face, our gestures, and our body language (or our lack of such expression). “Our nonverbal communication becomes a virtue when it habitually

¹ <https://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/whiteness05.htm>

² *Laudato si*, chapter 2, paragraph 90.

³ Quentin Hakenewerth, SM, *Growing in the Virtues of Jesus* (San Antonio, TX: Burke Publishing, 1997), 10-11.

⁴ Hakenewerth, *Growing in the Virtues*, 23.

communicates what is best in ourselves and what is most helpful to others.”⁵ *Silence of the mind* is the practice of filling our mind with what is life giving and excluding from our mind that which is harmful. We must monitor what we take into our mind.⁶ Our imagination allows us to dream dreams and reconfigure the possibilities for ourselves and our world. *Silence of imagination* allows us to quiet dreams and expectations that might be too small or destructive, and it allows us to think of new ways to look at situations or people—ways that are rich, constructive, and positive.⁷ *Silence of passions* involves being aware of what we feel, identifying what we feel, and experiencing what we feel. The energy of our passions comes from what we do, what we think, our memories, and our imagination.⁸

Marianist mindfulness is the other lens that we will look through while examining white privilege. At its core, mindfulness is the act of being present and being aware of where we are and what we are doing. Marianist mindfulness, to me, involves three specific scenes from the Gospels. The first is the wedding at Cana. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was one of the guests. She became *aware* that there was no more wine. By going to Jesus, she took *action*—she went to where Jesus and the other men were, and she told Jesus that the wine had run out. Then she told the servants to “Do whatever he tells you” (Jn 2:5). The second scene is when Jesus died on the cross. The Gospels tell us that Mary stood at the foot of the cross. That speaks not only of her *love* for Jesus but also of Mary’s own *strength*. The third scene that helps make Marianist mindfulness is the *stability* Mary showed in the Upper Room. She already had given birth to Jesus, raised him, participated in his ministry, stood at the foot of the cross, and been a witness to his resurrection. She did not leave the apostles with her work completed. She was in it until the end. She stayed with them, showing us what stability is and continuing for all her days to bring Jesus to the world.

This article began with a definition of white privilege. But what does privilege look like? Why do many of us with white skin become defensive or feel guilty when we talk about it? Admitting that white people are privileged by virtue of their skin color is not meant to invoke shame or guilt. Privilege is a fact of life in the United States—one that many of us with white skin never give a thought to, because it always has been normal for us. White privilege does not mean that white people did not work for or earn everything they have. It does mean that white people often have opportunities that people of color do not (i.e., in education, job opportunities, and securing loans and purchasing real estate).⁹ White people stay in hotels where there is shampoo that they can use if they forget theirs because it is made for their hair. On TV and at the movies, white people see people who look like them. The books white people read to their children have characters who look like them. It is easy to find dolls who have the same skin color. People with white skin are not followed everywhere they go in a store, and most do not have their receipts checked as they leave a store.¹⁰ White people do not worry about being pulled over while driving just because of their skin color or about being mistreated by law

⁵ Hakenewerth, *Growing in the Virtues*, 30.

⁶ Hakenewerth, *Growing in the Virtues*, 37.

⁷ Joseph H. Lackner, SM, *Virtues for Mission* (Dayton, OH: NACMS, 2003), 18-19.

⁸ Lackner, *Virtues for Mission*, 21-22.

⁹ Amy Hunter, “Lucky Zip Codes,” TEDx Gateway Arch video, posted Mar. 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g36ijwr3wc8>.

¹⁰ Angela Fichter, “The Emotional Toll of Shopping While Black,” *Medium*, accessed May 17, 2018, <https://theestablishment.co/the-emotional-toll-of-shopping-while-black-bcda5e51a7fd>. See also, “Unwelcome Climate for Black Shoppers, Study Shows,” *The Daily* (Case Western Reserve University), accessed May 17, 2018, <https://thedaily.case.edu/racial-profiling-retailers-creates-unwelcome-climate-black-shoppers-study-shows>.

enforcement.¹¹ They find the best school districts for their kids and have less problems in securing a loan or buying a house in that district. They are not concerned that there is a higher rate of in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions related to kids of color.¹²

Part of healing and reconciliation is telling, hearing, and understanding the truth. The Five Silences and Marianist mindfulness can facilitate healing and reconciliation because they lead to truth and to action. Related to this, here are a few important questions to ask.

- How does *silence of words* lead us to truth?
- How does *Marianist mindfulness* direct us to respond?
- What does the news tell us about white people and people of color in the world today?

Related to the latter question, it tells us about the high percentage of black-on-black crime.¹³ It tells us of policing that is biased against people of color.¹⁴ The news reports challenges in school districts in cities where the majority of students are of color. I have heard white people give all sorts of justifications for these issues. When I hear what I know to be untrue, I can no longer stay silent. When people I know and love say “there is no such thing as privilege” or say things because they do not really understand the phrase, I have to speak. I have to ask for the chance to explain what I know to be the truth. And, when my brothers and sisters of color speak the truth of their pain and the daily challenges they experience because of the color of their skin, I stop and listen. I show up for marches and protests because my presence is my voice.

Michael Brown died on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri. There were solid months of protests. It is quieter now but not because racism has ended. Protests still happen because awareness needs to be raised and because systemic racism still exists. Silence of signs is about body language, facial expressions, eye contact, and nonverbal exchanges. It is about showing up and being present. It is about giving a nod, a smile, a wave. It is about not being afraid, not crossing the street just because someone is large, male, and black, and not thinking they must be scary and up to no good. Silence of signs is about acknowledging the value and worth of a fellow human being who has more melanin in his skin than I do. There may be differences because of culture and heritage, but this does not excuse respect and treating each other with kindness and dignity. Marianist mindfulness challenges us to be aware of our nonverbal communication and, regardless of skin color, to acknowledge our brothers and sisters. It calls us to stand together until there really is “liberty and justice for all.”

“You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear. You’ve got to be taught from year to year. It’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear. You’ve got to be carefully taught.” The words are from the 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*. No one is born afraid or prejudiced. It is something babies learn from watching the subtle and blatant cues of those they love and

¹¹ US Justice Department, “Investigating the Ferguson Police Department,” Mar. 4, 2015, www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf, accessed June 2, 2018.

¹² Tom Loveless, “2017 Brown Center Report on American Education: Race and School Suspensions,” Brookings Institution, accessed May, 17, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/2017-brown-center-report-part-iii-race-and-school-suspensions>.

¹³ Anthony A. Braga and Rod K. Brunson, “The Police and Public Discourse on ‘Black-on-Black’ Violence,” *New Perspectives in Policing*, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/248588.pdf>.

¹⁴ US Justice Department, “Investigating the Ferguson Police Department.”

trust.¹⁵ Nelson Mandela once said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”¹⁶ Silence of the mind is all about what fills people’s minds. It includes the things overheard as adults are talking, the things children repeat that they heard at home, the “jokes” people tell—“meaning no harm”—the subconscious messages we get from TV and movies that tell people that others are more or less, that some deserve what others do not, that some are smarter or work harder, that everyone gets what they deserve, or whatever the message is. Children learn from what is in history books, what is taught in school, what is not in the books, and what is not taught. Silence of the mind lets people examine what they have learned and separate the wheat from the chaff, the truth from the lies. Perhaps racism must die first in our minds. Perhaps it is in the mind’s eye that we must look first for a space where racism ceases to exist.

“Imagine all the people living life in peace.” John Lennon wrote these words in 1971. There are those who believe racism is a thing of the past, that there is no such thing as white privilege,¹⁷ or who claim not to see color.¹⁸ If you really are aware of the world around us, of the daily goings on in our world, in our communities, our neighborhoods (not just mine and yours, but all the neighborhoods) is it possible to believe there is no racism anymore? Is it possible not to notice the color of someone’s skin? If it’s possible to believe it, does that make it true? *Silence of imagination* helps us look at dreams and imaginings and search for truth and direction. It encourages dreams that are constructive and rooted in truth. Constructive dreams, rooted in truth, can lead to actions that can bring positive change to our world.

What gets you excited? What gets you fired up? What makes you crazy happy or crazy angry? These are your passions! That is the energy to which *silence of passions* speaks. In my experience, conversations about white privilege definitely stir the passion pot. Most people do not sit as quiet observers during this conversation. Everyone has an opinion, fed by experiences and imagination. Is white privilege a thing or not a thing? Why does it matter? What needs to change? Who can change it? What do you feel, and where do you feel it? These are your passions talking to you, or maybe they are screaming to be heard! Silence of passions is about feeling the energy, quieting that which is not life-giving, and feeding and being fed by that which does bring life.

When looking at white privilege through the lenses of the Five Silences (words, signs, mind, imagination, and passion) and then again through the lens of Marianist mindfulness, what changes? Like Mary at Cana, what new awareness might there be? Picture yourself at an event where Jesus is in a different space than you are, a place that requires you to cross a physical or perceived barrier to get to him. You get there, tell him, and you hear him say, “Brother/Sister, what concern is this of mine?” And then you hear Mary say, “Do whatever he tells you!” Do you

¹⁵ “Prejudice and Discrimination Is Learned,” *Psych 424* blog, Penn State, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://sites.psu.edu/aspsy/2015/04/05/prejudice-and-discrimination-is-learned>.

¹⁶ “Nelson Mandela on the Nature of Love and Hate,” Georgetown University, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/quotes/nelson-mandela-on-the-nature-of-love-and-hate>.

¹⁷ Dennis Prager, “The Fallacy of ‘White Privilege,’” *National Review*, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/02/white-privilege-myth-reality/>.

¹⁸ Jarrett Hill, “Opinion: Dear ‘White Allies,’ Stop Saying that ‘You Don’t See Color,’” NBC News, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/opinion-dear-tomi-lahren-please-stop-saying-you-dont-see-n690801>.

have the steadfast strength of Mary standing at the foot of the cross? Will you commit to Marianist stability: to be “in it” ’til the end?

Conclusion

Marianist Father Philip Hoelle liked to say, “A vision without a task is a dream. A task without vision is drudgery, but a vision with a task is the hope of the world.”¹⁹ In a world desperately in need of hope, my vision is of a world where we truly live as a discipleship of equals, no longer separated by fear and hatred that is driven by differences in skin color. My vision is of a world where human rights are provided to all, without privilege driven by color. This paper is part of my task toward a society of true racial equality.

Reflection Questions

1. What are times when I should have spoken up but did not? What could I have said? Why did I remain silent?
2. What are times when I said something I should not have? Were there consequences? Did I make amends?
3. How have I used my body language to assert my privilege? Have I created distance or emphasized difference by my body language?
4. How have I used body language to be welcoming and inviting? How have I used body language to assert equality and oneness?
5. What have I learned in my life that has supported white privilege? What do I continue to do to support the system of privilege in my life and the lives of those closest to me?
6. What conscious choices have I made to deconstruct the system of white privilege? What truths have I learned that I can and will share with others?
7. What irrational thoughts do I carry regarding skin color and privilege? Fears?
8. What hopes do I have for our Marianist Family, our communities, our nation, our world, to truly become a discipleship of equals? What single step can I take today/this week/this month to make that happen?
9. What is the energy for me (the passion) around this topic of white privilege? Anger? Fear? Hurt? Hope?
10. What image can you think of that represents the positive energy you can start to bring to this issue?

¹⁹ Daniel M. Jordan, “The Dakota Center,” *Mission*, vol. 3, no. 2, 12.