

CATHOLIC CHURCH'S ROLE IN ENDING SLAVERY

During Black History Month, the subject of slavery was discussed in many forums. In some cases, treatment of the Catholic Church's role has been misrepresented.

Slavery is one of the most ubiquitous and historically accepted institutions in history. There is not a place on the globe where slavery did not exist, and protests against it have been extremely rare. The Hebrews, Greeks and Romans saw nothing wrong with it, and neither did the Africans, Chinese and Japanese. Aristotle thought slavery was a normal way of life.

It is important to recognize that, notwithstanding the American experience, slavery has almost never had anything to do with race: people of the same race, ethnicity, tribe, or clan enslaved each other. Moreover, it was not uncommon for former slaves to enslave others. That slavery still exists today in parts of Africa (which did not make it illegal until the 1980s) is proof of its tenacious legacy.

If slavery was considered normal throughout most of history, when, and for what reasons, was it finally seen as objectionable? We can credit Western civilization with that honor: It was the first civilization to condemn slavery. The driving force behind it was Christianity.

The first person in history to condemn slavery publicly was Saint Patrick. A former slave himself, he enunciated the wisdom of natural law without specifically invoking it. All men were created equal in the eyes of God, he said, and should therefore be treated as equals in law. It was this quintessentially Catholic concept—all humans possess equal dignity—that eventually proved to be triumphant.

In antiquity, slavery was so common that Pope Pius I in the second century and Pope Callistus I in the third century were slaves. It wasn't until the fourth century that a bishop rejected slavery, and that was Gregory of Nyssa.

In practice, the Church's opposition to slavery began with its objections to the inhumane treatment of slaves; only later did it condemn the institution itself. But by protesting maltreatment, it did more to lay the groundwork for the eventual demise of slavery than any other institution, secular or religious.

Given the Church's role in opposing slavery it was troubling to read a recent Washington Post article posted online by Shannen Dee Williams, a professor of history at Villanova University. Apparently unaware of Saint Patrick and Gregory of Nyssa (who later became a saint), she claims the Church played "the leading role" in the history of slavery. She even goes so far as to say that the Catholic Church was "the first global institution to declare that Black lives did not matter."

This is not simply an example of shoddy scholarship—it is a vicious lie. To make her case, she cites papal bulls by Pope Nicholas V in 1452 and Pope Alexander VI in 1493 as evidence that "the Catholic Church authorized the perpetual enslavement of Africans and the seizure of 'non-Christian lands.'" This account is seriously flawed.

Nicholas V's "Dum Diversas" was a response to those who sought "to extinguish [the] Christian religion." The pope argued that the King of Portugal had a right to protect his people and to hold in "perpetual servitude" the Saracens (Muslims) and pagans who threatened Christianity. The pope did not make a sweeping statement about enslaving Africans, as Williams contends.

Pope Alexander VI's "Inter Caetera" awarded colonial rights over newly discovered lands to Spain and Portugal. Nowhere in

his papal bull does the pope even mention slaves or slavery. For Williams to imply otherwise is scurrilous.

Had Williams dug a little deeper she would have cited Pope Paul III's decision to forbade slavery in the New World under penalty of excommunication. This was in 1537, at a time when no other leader, secular or religious, was denouncing slavery. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI also condemned slavery, but it was Pope Leo XIII in 1888 who took the most authoritative steps to abolish this institution.

It was the Catholic Church's teaching on natural law—all humans possess equal dignity and equal rights—that proved to be determinative in the end. Aristotle may be the father of natural law but he thought it was normal for slaves to obey their masters. The Church disagreed. It invoked natural rights—our equal rights come from God, not government—thus making the case to undermine slavery.

An honest historical account of the role played by the Catholic Church in ending slavery is not being taught in the schools, at any level. This has less to do with scholarship than it does politics.

To cite one example, how many college students are aware that the first prominent sociologist in American history, George Fitzhugh, was known as a progressive and a strong defender of slavery? In the 1850s, he maintained that because blacks were intellectually and morally inferior to white people, they could never successfully compete with whites in a capitalist society and were therefore better off as slaves. This is what happens when natural law and natural rights are jettisoned.

It is time for those in education, and for the publishers of elementary and secondary textbooks in history and the social sciences, to render an accurate depiction of the Catholic Church's role in ending slavery.