Felix Cepeda, a 38-year-old Catholic activist and community organizer, cannot remember how many protests he has participated in. But there is one, in particular, that stays with him. On the night of Oct. 18, 2016, Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old African-American woman with schizophrenia, was shot and killed by a sergeant in the New York Police Department. Ms. Danner lived in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, where Mr. Cepeda currently lives. Just a day later, Mr. Cepeda and dozens of
others marched in a protest in the Bronx. The march was an expression of the anger, disgust and fear felt by people of color over police brutality, and it was part of a larger, nationwide group galvanized by the death of Trayvon Martin in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement.

Mr. Cepeda tells me he felt called to march with Black Lives Matter because of his experience growing up black and Catholic.

Mr. Cepeda's parents arrived in New York in the 1970s from Jimayaco, a small town with strong Catholic roots in the city of La Vega, the third largest city in the Dominican Republic. Mr. Cepeda grew up in Harlem in the 1980s, a time when life in New York was difficult. The use of crack cocaine was on the rise, and it fueled the city's already high rate of crime and violence. Our Lady of Annunciation, his family's home parish, was one of the few spaces where he felt safe. “Our parish in Harlem was bilingual—we went to Spanish Mass every Sunday, and I was an altar boy,” he says.

Mr. Cepeda credits his Catholic faith with instilling in him a sense of activism. “I realized that the church I love,” he says, has “this history of resistance, where a few Catholics have pushed the church to fight against racism. They inspire me to fight for racial justice inside the church and in society.” He has been involved in protest movements in New York and the Dominican Republic for over 10 years. Last year he gained media attention after spending weeks in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral demanding that Catholic churches in New York City serve as sanctuaries for undocumented immigrants.

Mr. Cepeda is not alone in his desire to combine his faith with his work for racial equality. In recent years, many religious leaders, including Catholics, have contributed to the national conversations around race.

While racial justice has not been at the forefront of the public agenda of the Catholic Church, many Catholics, like Mr. Cepeda, have encouraged church leaders to meet with activists within the movement. “I think, like the civil rights movement and the
black power movement, the Black Lives Matter movement is this generation’s response to racism,” Mr. Cepeda says, adding that there is much the Catholic Church can learn from the black citizens leading the movement.

A Movement is Born
In 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager in Florida, Alicia Garza, a civil rights activist from Oakland, Calif., wrote what she describes as a love letter to black people on Facebook: “Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter. Our lives matter.” The post was eventually shared by Patrisse Cullors, a California-based artist and activist, with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Along with Opal Tometi, a community organizer based in New York City, Ms. Garza and Ms. Cullors began to build the B.L.M. network on social media. The women wanted to draw attention to the ways that black and brown bodies are devalued and criminalized in the United States.

“I think, like the civil rights movement and the black power movement, the Black Lives Matter movement is this generation’s response to racism.”

While the B.L.M. organization was born in 2013, Ms. Garza emphasizes that the organization is part of a movement that has been around for much longer. “The movements to eradicate racism and systemic oppression, of black people in particular, have been around since this country was founded,” she tells me. She points to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s as an example.

In recent years, the fight for racial justice has been galvanized by the deaths of black Americans at the hands of police officers and armed citizens, including but not limited to: 17-year-old Jordan Davis, killed by an armed white man in Florida in 2012; 18-year-old Renisha McBride, killed by an armed white man in Michigan in 2013; 43-year-old Eric Garner, killed by a New York City police officer on Staten Island; 23-year-old Sylville Smith, killed by a Milwaukee police officer in 2016; and, most recently, Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr., a 21-year-old black man shot in the back by a police officer in Hoover, Ala., last November.
Black Lives Matter has channeled the organization's passion into powerful posts on Facebook and Twitter, giving the country an unrelenting look into these deaths and those of other black Americans. In 2014, following the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., Ms. Cullors and the activist and writer Darnell Moore organized the Black Life Matters Freedom Ride. In two weeks they gathered over 600 people to support the network’s first in-person protest.

Ferguson quickly became a defining moment in the organization’s history, and in the five years since, the movement has grown to become the first major racial justice movement in the United States since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Unlike its predecessor, which was led by the direct action of churches and Christian leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Lives Matter movement is by and large secular. There are B.L.M. chapters in England, Canada, South Africa, France and Germany. Activists within the organization have met with politicians to discuss policies to combat police brutality and launched Campaign Zero—focused on ending police brutality—and the Police Union Contract Project—which investigates the contracts given to U.S. police officers and emphasizes police accountability. “We’ve had politicians who were corrupt be ousted because of this movement,” Ms. Garza says. “We have had a new international dialogue about the pervasiveness and endurance of racism because of this movement.”
The group has also given rise to movements like the #SayHerName campaign, which raises awareness of the often ignored violence faced by black women and girls in the United States.

**A Voice Crying Out**
Many Catholics of color feel that issues of racial justice are not sufficiently emphasized by church leaders. The B.L.M. movement has given voice to the experiences of black individuals in the United States through its unyielding critique of white privilege and the complicity of white Americans in systems of oppression.

Ariana Allen is a journalism student in her senior year at Loyola University in Chicago. Born and raised Catholic in Washington, D.C., she moved to St. Louis when she was 10. “I was very involved in church—choir, altar serving, drama ministry,” she tells me. “The church was always a good experience for me.” She says she never thought about her identity as a black woman and her identity as a Catholic as intersecting until she started at Loyola in 2015.

The death of Michael Brown awakened her to police brutality. “I had friends who knew him,” she tells me. “I have always been aware that I am a black woman, but that was the first time I really realized that blackness could be criminalized, that blackness could be used as something that scares others.” Ms. Allen’s home parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe, was involved in the Ferguson protests; but, she adds, most of the religious presence she witnessed was from the Baptist community. She tells me that if there were more of a push among Catholics to advocate for black lives, more black Americans would feel that the church was listening to them.

*Many Catholics of color feel that issues of racial justice are not sufficiently emphasized by church leaders.*

Harriet Martin, a junior at Loyola University Chicago, was born and raised Catholic in Phoenix, Ariz. Her family moved to Virginia when she was 12 years old, where she lived for three years before moving to Alaska. Ms. Martin did not fully embrace her Catholic identity until her father, who was Baptist, joined the Catholic Church.
Like Ms. Allen, she tells me that the church has not done enough when it comes to racial justice, adding that church leaders should embrace the Black Lives Matter movement. “The movement isn’t saying that all lives don’t matter—just that black people are being unjustly treated,” she says. “I think the movement and Catholicism go hand in hand.”

**Race and Reparations**
While many individual Catholics have long worked for racial justice, the institutional response from the church has often been less obvious. In recent years, the Catholic Church in the United States has begun to acknowledge publicly many of the ways it has been complicit in systems of racism and oppression. Among those responding is Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic university in the United States. In 2016 it formed the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. The goal of the working group is to present the university’s history and ties to slavery. In 1838 the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, which founded Georgetown, sold 272 men, women and children whom it had earlier purchased as slaves.

The working group has published a report with recommendations for ways that the university can begin to atone for its slaveholding past. These include renaming buildings, creating the Institute for the Study of Slavery and Its Legacies and dedicating a memorial to the 272 enslaved persons sold by the Jesuits. John J. DeGioia, the president of Georgetown, also announced that the school will offer preferential admission to students who apply and are direct descendants of the individuals the Jesuits sold. Many have described Georgetown’s initiatives as the first examples of what slavery reparations in the United States might look like.

Onita Estes-Hicks was born in 1936 in New Orleans, where black Catholicism has a rich history. Her father was a fourth-degree member of the Knights of Peter Claver, and her mother loved the church. Growing up, there were always priests visiting her family home. From the Latin Masses to choir practices to the education she received from the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Ms. Estes-Hicks loved the church.
Her faith was tested when in 2004 she discovered that her paternal great-great-grandparents, Nace and Biby Butler and their children were among the slaves sold by the Jesuits of Georgetown. “This breached our awareness of ourselves, who we were as Catholics,” Ms. Estes-Hicks tells me. For years, she worked with her family to recover the loss of identity the discovery spurred. They retold Catholic stories they had always heard growing up. Ms. Estes-Hicks says she found comfort in the memory of her father and the Catholic rituals he had practiced while alive.

It was not until 2016, however, when Georgetown publicly acknowledged the slave sale, that she began to feel whole again. “I came out with a deeper sense of what it meant to be a Catholic and also with a deeper sense of how Catholicism had failed us.”

**Responding to the Call**
Some institutional progress is being made in the Catholic Church. Last year the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops formed the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, which was established to develop pastoral and political strategies to tackle racism in the United States. Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, La., chairman of the committee, said in an email that the U.S.C.C.B. decided to form the committee because of an “awareness of a resurgence of harmful and racially charged attitudes, hatred and bigotry that have gripped the country.”
In the past year, Bishop Fabre says, the committee has held interfaith gatherings and hosted speakers like Bryan Stevenson, the founder and executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala. Last November, the U.S. bishops promulgated the church’s first pastoral letter on racism since the statement “Brothers and Sisters to Us” was published in 1979.

The new pastoral letter, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,” was drafted by the ad hoc committee along with the U.S.C.C.B.’s Committee on Cultural Diversity and touches on issues like the water crisis in Flint, Mich., police misconduct, racial biases in the criminal justice system and the relationship between racism and other forms of prejudice, including anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The letter also calls on Catholics to work for racial justice and proposes practical steps, including acknowledging the complicity of Catholics in the sin of racism, educating people about the nation’s legacies of slavery and discrimination and working for racial justice in parishes as well as in civic and social institutions. Bishop Fabre says he hopes the pastoral letter will challenge all Catholics.

Matthew Cressler, the author of Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migrations, says that while the newest pastoral letter is an improvement over the 1979 statement, it is not enough.

“I think that it is imperative that white Catholics recognize their past and present and ongoing culpability and complicity and the maintenance of and sustaining of white supremacy in our country.”

Mr. Cressler says that while the letter recognizes that racism is one of the United States’ historical sins, it fails to define explicitly the role of the Catholic Church and white Catholics in this sin. “I think that it is imperative that white Catholics recognize their past and present and ongoing culpability and complicity and the maintenance of and sustaining of white supremacy in our country,” he tells me. He adds that the omission of the Black Lives Matter movement within the pastoral letter is troubling, adding that the Catholic Church has a lot to learn from one of the most important racial justice movements since the 1960s.
When asked why many within the church are unwilling to engage with members of the movement, Bishop Fabre said, “I don’t know how many within the church have or have not engaged with the members of the Black Lives Matter movement, nor do I know what their motivations are if they have not.” He continued, “What I do know is that as bishops we are teachers and our primary focus is teaching and preaching the Gospel and ideally divulging the beauty of the Catholic faith, wherein the notion of justice and mercy are central concepts.”

Words Into Actions
Many black Catholics interviewed for this article appreciate the effort behind the new pastoral letter but have concerns about the execution of its recommendations.

Adrienne Alexander was born in Atlanta and raised Catholic. She credits the black parishes of her childhood with forming her Catholic identity. “For most of my life, my dad has worked for the church. Because of that, I was exposed to different parishes and expressions of Catholicism,” Ms. Alexander says. Her family never missed Mass, was involved in their parish community and prayed together daily.

Ms. Alexander, who works for a labor union in Chicago, where she lives with her husband and 2-year-old daughter, has been plugged into church news for most of her life. She has awaited the publication of the pastoral letter since the bishops conference announced the anti-racism committee last year, but she is disappointed with the results. “The letter had the feel of ‘Racism 101.’ You could sense the carefulness with which the words were crafted, the land mines which they seemed to be dodging,” she says. “I wish we still weren’t at entry-level discussions, but I guess that is to be expected when the conversation has not really been advanced at the national level in decades.”

Leslye Colvin echoes Ms. Alexander’s sentiments. Ms. Colvin was born in Ozark, Ala., in 1958. In the 1960s, three generations of her family converted to Catholicism and, despite living in a segregated town, were welcomed by clergy and parishioners.
“Anyone can be prejudiced, but in the society in which I live, in the United States of America, I, as an African-American woman, cannot be racist because I don’t have the power that accompanies being white.”

While she welcomes the latest efforts by the U.S. church, she wishes the pastoral letter had discussed white privilege and how it has contributed to racism and oppression in this country. She adds that the bishops should have made a clear distinction between prejudice and racism rather than describing the latter as something all Catholics have been complicit in. Anyone can hold prejudiced views, she believes, but racism involves individuals and systems with power using their resources to discriminate and oppress people of color.

“Anyone can be prejudiced, but in the society in which I live, in the United States of America, I, as an African-American woman, cannot be racist because I don’t have the power that accompanies being white,” she tells me. “White privilege cannot be dismantled by people of color. I wish that there had been a call for allies who are white to step forward.”

Father Michael Trail is a diocesan priest in Chicago. Born and raised Catholic, he grew up in a multicultural parish in Detroit. While the seeds of his vocation were planted in Detroit, it was after moving to Chicago and making his faith his own that he felt called to the priesthood. He was ordained in 2015. He is now the associate pastor at Queen of All Saints Basilica in the Sauganash neighborhood, an affluent community in the city of Chicago. As Catholics, Father Trail says, we are called to be vocal on issues like racial justice. He tries to make a difference through his preaching. “For me, a person of color, I think I can speak about it with a different perspective because I’ve seen it first hand.” He adds that he wants to build a bridge between the world he grew up knowing and the world of his parishioners.

Father Trail tells me he was pleased when the bishops created the anti-racism committee last year and published the pastoral letter in November. “I’m happy to see that the bishops put out the document because it’s a concrete moment to show that the bishops see racism as a serious issue that needs to be addressed.”
He adds that the place where he has seen the largest efforts from the church on racial justice is at the local level. He credits the office of Cardinal Blase Cupich, the archbishop of Chicago, for addressing and working to combat violence in the city. And while he welcomes the antiracism letter from the bishops, he, too, believes there must be more. Regarding the church’s response, he says, “On the national level, I think [it is] still very muted, and we’ve not grasped talking about racial justice as much as we should.”

•••

At the national level, programs like the U.S. bishops’ Catholic Campaign for Human Development can make a big difference by lifting up local activists and their work. In 2014, Meg Olson was based in St. Louis, where she worked in the advocacy department of Catholic Charities and directed the local chapter of the campaign. Upon hearing about the death of Michael Brown, she says she “felt incredibly called to go out in the streets.”

Ms. Olson helped medical teams that were assisting activists who had been exposed to tear gas or hit with rubber bullets. She worked with Metropolitan Congregations United, which is a part of the Gamaliel Network that trains community and faith leaders nationwide to advocate for social justice, to set up churches and places of worship as safe spaces for Ferguson activists. During the third week of her involvement in Ferguson, she received two key phone calls: one from Ralph McCloud, the national director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, and another from the Rev. Jack Schuler, who at the time was the chaplain for Catholic Charities and a pastor in St. Louis. They both asked Ms. Olson the same question: What can we do to help you?

She said that local Catholic leaders like Father Schuler urged Catholics to get involved in the protest movement in Ferguson. “There are many Catholic parishes that are affiliates of Metropolitan Congregations United, but M.C.U., which is funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, was really on the
ground organizing as a local faith-based organization," she says. “It was really through them...that many of the Catholics that I was working with were entering into the work.”

•••

The three million African-American Catholics in the United States make up just over 4 percent of the U.S. Catholic population. While the number of black U.S. Catholics might be small, their faith is rich, and their stories and perspectives are an intrinsic part of the church. Many said that although at times they feel ignored by the church, they cannot imagine leaving. “I think it’s the long suffering of black Catholics, who had to go into a religion that, to all intents and purposes, was a white religion,” Ms. Estes-Hicks tells me. “But look what we did to it. We transformed it—we made that religion our own.”

While the number of black U.S. Catholics might be small, their faith is rich, and their stories and perspectives are an intrinsic part of the church.

All the black Catholics I spoke with hope that the church will continue to change and grow in its advocacy against racism. Many suggested practical steps: transparency and concrete follow-up when releasing documents about the church’s complicity in racism; Catholic leaders and clergy explicitly, consistently and continually calling out systems of oppression within the United States and white people’s role in perpetuating racism. Many said the links should be more visible between the work bishops are doing and what the faithful are seeing. And, finally, almost everyone I spoke with agreed that the Catholic Church will not succeed in its work toward racial reconciliation unless the hierarchy enters into dialogue with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Father Trail believes this dialogue would be advantageous not just for the church but for the movement as well. “The church is in all aspects of society,” he says, “I think that the Black Lives Matter movement can learn from the church in the way in which
she dialogues with so many different paths of society. I think there is mutual enrichment all the way around.”

Ms. Garza, one of the founders of the movement, would welcome such dialogue. “The purpose of faith, I think, is to be connected to something bigger than yourself and to be able to carry out the agenda of that faith,” she says. Ms. Estes-Hicks echoes this sentiment. While she is grateful for the groundbreaking strides made at Georgetown, she says that the church overall must always challenge itself to do more. She believes a good next step would be entering into dialogue with activists within the movement.

“I don't see how the church can remain outside something as significant as Black Lives Matter,” Ms. Estes-Hicks says. “It's a Christlike movement.”

Correction (2/4/19): In one instance, the nature of Michael Brown's death was inaccurately described. It was a shooting death.

This article also appeared in print, under the headline “A Call to Love,” in the February 18, 2019, issue.

More:  BLACK CATHOLICS / RACE / CIVIL RIGHTS