

Four Ways for White People to Challenge White Apathy

By Ken Homan, S.J.

In his famous ["Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"](#) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. poignantly stated, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice..." This moderation is often born of an apathy that must be overcome in order to move toward racial justice. Below are four ways to challenge that apathy:

1) Confronting your own apathy:

Our own apathy often takes two forms: lazy answers and inaction. When discussing racial justice, lazy answers often come to the fore. These answers attempt to oversimplify histories and dismiss the realities of people's lives. They might include things like "We just need to get along" or "Naming things racist just stokes division." I call these answers lazy because they don't require any work from us. They maintain our privilege and leave the burden of racial justice to communities of color. While they speak of moderation and neutrality, they in fact maintain oppression.

These lazy answers lead to inaction, shirking the burden of justice. If our commitment to racial justice does not require concrete steps, then it is apathetic. Moreover, the work of being an anti-racist is not done by finding an easy answer or quickly accomplished task. It is an ongoing transformative experience, much like faith itself. Our actions might be a variety of activities—reading, learning, advocating, demonstrating—but whatever it is should challenge us to greater depth.

2) Invite a friend to challenge your apathy together:

Find a white friend and hold each other accountable. This accountability might mean joining a civil rights organization to learn more, committing to a reading group, or participating in a day of advocacy together. Undoing racism is a long-term commitment, and the support of a friend is vital for processing and learning. It's important to remember, however, not to put the onus of responsibility on your friends, particularly friends of color.

3) Challenge racist myths:

Racist myths rely on the lazy answers. Challenging them can be exceptionally difficult because it often requires confronting broader narratives that affirm privilege. Racial wealth disparities do not exist because the American Dream failed or some races didn't work hard enough—it exists because of the racism built into our political and economic systems. These myths, then, are exceptionally dangerous because of the way in which they uphold apathy. For example, you might run into people who say, "Sure, there's injustice, but what about black-on-black crime?" This question was popularized by white supremacists. They hoped to discredit understandings of systematic racism and decrease empathy for Black communities by making Black individuals seem inherently violent. The reality is that crime primarily occurs within communities. White-on-white [violent crime is almost identical](#) to black-on-black. The biggest differences are related to [prosecution and sentencing](#)—crimes committed against white people are [punished more harshly](#) than those committed against Black individuals.

REFLECTION

4) Pray

In 1967, then-Superior General [Fr. Pedro Arrupe critiqued American Jesuits](#)* for failing to know or pray with individuals and communities of color. This failure is certainly true of many white Jesuits and many white Catholics today. Prayer—our binding relationship with God and our neighbors—must fundamentally shake us from our apathy. The Lord hears the cry of the oppressed, but do we? We must open our hearts to the burning of the Holy Spirit. We might join communities of color in prayer, perhaps requiring us to learn new languages, customs, or styles of liturgy. When we lift up the voices of faith leaders, we can make explicit efforts to recognize faith leaders of color.

One of the deep challenges of racism is the way in which it connects to so many other injustices—[environmental degradation](#), [LGBTQ+ discrimination](#), and [sexism](#) to name only a few. Confronting our apathy regarding racism should urge us to confront our apathy regarding other unjust systems, and vice-versa. These four steps are starting places for addressing each of these systems. If it does not, then we must again reevaluate that apathy.

**Content warning: This piece contains racialized language used in a historical context.*

Reflection Questions

1. How have you noticed white apathy in your own life or your community?
2. What is one concrete action you will take to challenge white apathy?
3. Who might you invite to join you and hold you accountable in this process?
4. What types of prayer and reflection can support you in your work towards anti-racism?

Faith in Action

Use one of the following resources to take action and challenge white apathy today:

- Complete at least one action on this list: [75 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice](#) (Medium).
- Read a book from this [Anti-Racism Reading List](#).
- Consider buying anti-racism books from [black-owned bookstores](#).
- Learn [the stories](#) of the people who have been killed due to systemic racism and police brutality.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit,
Pull racism out by the root,
From our hearts and institutions.
Give us the gifts of fortitude and wisdom
To learn, pray, and act
Each day of our lives
To build a world free of the sin of racism.
Amen.