

Letter to President DeGioia Regarding Georgetown's Slave Trading Legacy

November 13th, 2017
VIA EMAIL

Dear President DeGioia:

In September of 2015, you assembled the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation to acknowledge Georgetown University's historical relationship with slave trading. This Working Group produced, and submitted to you, a final report and a series of recommendations to foster introspection and moral growth in the Georgetown community. It is in this spirit that I write to you now, as a recent graduate, having witnessed a conspicuous failure in Georgetown University's recent efforts.

Georgetown University's Catholic identity behooves it to acknowledge the issue of slavery as it is discussed in the Bible. Indeed, if Georgetown University's Catholic identity is one that maintains "the centrality of reconciliation to the mission of Jesus Christ", as it claims in the Working Group's final report, then an investigation of the Bible's stance on slave trading is paramount [1]. Nevertheless, no public remark from Georgetown University faculty or published resource from the Working Group has endeavored to do this.

I'm sad to write that the website produced by the Working Group, its final report, your remarks on September 1st, 2016, and the special *Liturgy of Remembrance, Contrition, and Hope* held on April 18th, 2017 all fail in this regard. Even more disappointing, I suspect this lack of introspection was motivated by a desire to avoid harsh truths—the very problem the Working Group hoped to address.

The Bible explicitly and wholly endorses slave trading throughout its text. In the Old Testament, after Moses leads the Exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea to Mt. Sinai, God gives the Israelites a collection of written laws, known as the Law of Moses, which sanction slavery. Exodus 21 is one passage in which God delineates his expectations for the treatment of slaves: ²⁰ "Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, ²¹ but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property." (New International Version, Exodus 21:20-21)

A plethora of verses such as these are readily available in the Old Testament, to an extent such that listing all of them in this letter would be cumbersome. I have thus opted to include an appendix of Old Testament verses where the God character of the Bible discusses slavery, and covers instructions to: buy/attain slaves from other nations, force a slave woman into marriage, and properly atone for raping slaves.

This appendix also includes verses from the New Testament—which does no more to condemn slavery or slave owners. In Ephesians 6, Paul the Apostle—assuming he wrote the Pauline epistles—issues an obscene mandate for slaves:

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that

the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

(New International Version, Ephesians 6:5-8)

In the parable of the faithful servant, found in multiple chapters of the New Testament, Jesus Christ similarly has no qualms condoning slavery and recommending physical assault on slaves:

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(New International Version, Matthew 24:45-51)

President DeGioia, Catholic institutions cannot ignore the teachings of their holy scripture, particularly when these teachings have historical significance. The Georgetown Slavery Archive has established that Biblical justifications for slavery were prominent within Georgetown University’s leadership in the 19th century—as they were among the majority of religious leaders in that time.^[2]

[Abolition] is not religion- it is not piety- it is a profanation of the gospel of peace and charity to allow so fell a spirit to be called religious!

God is a God of order- his religion secures order, and the ministers of that religion should be the ministers of order. How horrifying is the spectacle of a man clothed in the garb, or speaking the language, of religion, prowling about the humble habitations of our unsuspecting slaves, and, in the name of God, seducing them into rebellion and murder; and by intoxicating their minds with the poison of religious fanaticism, make them renew the scenes of Southampton, as beneficial to themselves and pleasing to heaven!

Could my feeble voice reach these misguided abettors of disorder, I would ask them, what possible advantage they can anticipate from the spread of their favorite system of Abolition?

James Ryder, S.J., President of Georgetown University from 1840-1845, 1848-1851

These justifications are identical to those offered by Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America ^[3]:

[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation...it has existed in all ages, has been found

among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts.

Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America

It is for these reasons that I insist that you, President DeGioia, continue Georgetown University's reconciliation efforts by assembling the university's scholars and academic resources to publicly reconcile Georgetown's Catholic identity with the pro-slavery views espoused in the Bible. There are many forms through which this new effort can be realized, including: debates on campus between distinguished guests or, more simply, a page on Georgetown's Slavery Archive website which responds to the issues I've presented in this letter. Ignoring these issues will render the recent progress of reconciliation incomplete; if not, disingenuous.

You remarked the following on September 1st, 2016 while commenting on Georgetown University's recent Working Group ^[4]:

Our style is often parodied. Academics are perceived at times as too deliberative, that we establish committees and working groups as ways to evade and avoid tough decisions, that we hide in "theories." Terms like "ivory tower" are not meant as compliments. We are accused of not being a part of the "real world." No doubt some of these descriptions can be true.

But are they to be true of academics at Georgetown University? I submit that your decision to respond to the questions I have posed in this letter are a test of your very words. And the answer provided on these questions will decide whether Georgetown University is to become an honest institution; one that is capable of the self-reflection and change which prompted you to assemble the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation.

Kind Regards,
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Appendix

Old Testament

²“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything. ³If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him. ⁴If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

⁵“But if the servant declares, ‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ ⁶then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

(New International Version, Exodus 21:2-6)

⁷“If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. ⁸If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her.

(New International Version, Exodus 21:7-8)

²⁰“Anyone who beats their male or female slave with a rod must be punished if the slave dies as a direct result, ²¹but they are not to be punished if the slave recovers after a day or two, since the slave is their property.”

(New International Version, Exodus 21:20-21)

²⁶“An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye. ²⁷And an owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth.

(New International Version, Exodus 21:26-27)

²⁸“If a bull gores a man or woman to death, the bull is to be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. ²⁹If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull is to be stoned and its owner also is to be put to death. ³⁰However, if payment is demanded, the owner may redeem his life by the payment of whatever is demanded. ³¹This law also applies if the bull gores a son or daughter. ³²If the bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels^[a] of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull is to be stoned to death.

(New International Version, Exodus 21:28-32)

²⁰“If a man sleeps with a female slave who is promised to another man but who has not been ransomed or given her freedom, there must be due punishment. Yet they are not to be put to death, because she had not been freed. ²¹The man, however, must bring a ram to the entrance to the tent of meeting for a guilt offering to the LORD. ²²With the ram of the guilt offering the priest is to make atonement for him before the LORD for the sin he has committed, and his sin will be forgiven.”

(New International Version, Leviticus 19: 20-22)

⁴⁴“Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. ⁴⁵You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. ⁴⁶You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.

(New International Version, Leviticus 25:44-46)

¹⁰When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. ¹¹If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you.

(New International Version, Deuteronomy 20:10-11)

¹⁰When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, ¹¹if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife. ¹²Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails ¹³and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife.

(New International Version, Deuteronomy 21:10-13)

¹⁷Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, ¹⁸but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.”

(New International Version, Numbers 31:17-18)

New Testament

⁴⁵But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk. ⁴⁶The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers.

⁴⁷ “The servant who knows the master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows. ⁴⁸ But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

(New International Version, Luke 12:45-48)

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. ⁶ Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. ⁷ Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, ⁸ because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

⁹ And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

(New International Version, Ephesians 6:5-9)

²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord’s freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ’s slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.

(New International Version, 1 Corinthians 7:21-23)

4 Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

(New International Version, Colossians 4:1)

²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

(New International Version, Matthew 18:25)

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ Truly I tell you, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, ‘My master is staying away a long time,’ ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(New International Version, Matthew 24:45-51)

6 All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.² Those who have believing masters should not show them disrespect just because they are fellow believers. Instead, they should serve them even better because their masters are dear to them as fellow believers and are devoted to the welfare of their slaves. These are the things you are to teach and insist on.

(New International Version, 1 Timothy 6:1-3)

Bibliography

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