

The Catholic Church on Racism

Introduction: The US Catholic Bishops have called all men and women of good will to eliminate racism as an essential part of creating a more just society and becoming more Christlike. This presentation collects nine (9) excerpts from the US Bishops and the Catechism of the Catholic Church to focus on the problem of racism during this month of February, which is dedicated to improving understanding of Black History in the USA. Questions for reflection and discussion are provided to invite readers to analyze and connect the Church's teaching on racism to American experience today. This resource helps to address and understand the dimensions of the problem of racism and concludes with a prayer.

Brothers and Sisters To Us, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979

In 1958 we spoke out against the blatant forms of racism that divided people through discriminatory laws and enforced segregation. A decade later in the 1960's, in a second pastoral letter we again underscored the continuing scandal of racism and called for decisive action to eradicate it from our society. Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society. Movement toward authentic justice demands a simultaneous attack on both evils. . . As economic pressures tighten, those people who are often black, Hispanic, Native American and Asian – and poor -- slip further into the unending cycle of poverty, deprivation, ignorance, disease, and crime.

The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1935

Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of races. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.

This is the mystery of our Church, that all men and women are brothers and sisters, all one in Christ, all bear the image of the Eternal God. The Church is truly universal, embracing all races, for it is "the visible sacrament of this saving unity."

But each of us as Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past. Many of us have been prisoners of fear and prejudice. We have preached the Gospel while closing our eyes to the racism it condemns. We have allowed conformity to social pressures to replace compliance with social justice. But past mistakes must not hinder the Church's response to the challenges of the present.

Let the Church speak out, not only in the assemblies of the bishops, but in every diocese and parish in the land, in every chapel and religious house, in every school, in every social service agency, and in every institution that bears the name Catholic. As Pope John Paul II has proclaimed, the Church must be aware of the threats to humanity and of all that opposes the endeavor to make life itself more human. The Church must strive to make every element of human life correspond to the true dignity of the human person.

Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society. Conversion is the ever present task of each Christian.



This principle of the equal dignity of all persons, of whatever race, already finds solid support in the sciences and a firm basis in philosophy, ethics and religions in general. . . .Hence every form of discrimination based on race is absolutely unacceptable. Faith in the one God, Creator and Redeemer of all humankind made in his image and likeness, constitutes the absolute and inescapable negation of any racist ideologies.

Equality does not mean uniformity. It is important to recognize the diversity and complementarity of one another's cultural riches and moral qualities. Equality of treatment therefore implies a certain recognition of differences which minorities themselves demand in order to develop according to their own specific characteristics, in respect for others and for the common good of society and the world community.

No human group, however, can boast of having a natural superiority over others, or of exercising any discrimination that affects the basic rights of the person. Acts of discrimination among persons and peoples for racist or other reasons, religious or ideological, and which lead to contempt and to the phenomena of exclusion, must be denounced and brought to light without hesitation and strongly rejected in order to promote equitable behavior, legislative dispositions and social structures.

From: *The Church and Racism*, Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988

What We Have Seen and Heard; A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops in the U.S., 1984

This stain of racism, which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, is an opportunity to work for renewal through evangelization. The causes of justice and social concern are an essential part of evangelization. To preach to the powerful without denouncing oppression is to trivialize the Gospel.

We now have a solemn responsibility to lead the Church's work within the Black community. We must counter the assumption that to become Catholic is to abandon one's racial heritage and one's people! The Catholic Church is not a "White Church." It is universal and, hence, Catholic. The Black presence in the American Catholic Church is a precious witness to the universal character of Catholicism.

The Catholic Church, however, must preserve its multi-cultural identity. In this country it must reflect the richness of African-American history and its heritage. This is our gift to the Church in the United States.

***Moving Beyond Racism: Learning to See with the Eyes of Christ Brothers and Sisters in Christ*, Bishops of Chicago, 2000**

We begin with three facts. First, racism exists here; it is part of the American landscape. Second, racism is completely contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Third, all baptized Catholics have a moral obligation to work toward the elimination of racism.

What is meant by racism? Racism is a personal sin and social disorder; it involves not only prejudice but also the use of religious, social, political, economic or historical power to keep one race privileged.

Racism can be personal but also institutional; it can be a part of the structures of judicial, medical, social, educational, and other institutions. It can be internal and it can be cultural; cultural conditioning can shape internal attitudes towards difference.

Racism distorts the word of God in both the Old and New Testaments. Rather than being built on divine truth, racism is built on the shifting sands of personal insecurity, self-deception and the idolatry of racial superiority.

We are one human family.

Pope John Paul II

Love Thy Neighbor As Thyself,

Committee of African American Catholics of the
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001

One cannot talk about the race problem in America without treating the intertwine of economics. Poverty and racism are closely related issues in this country because opportunity is divided between White and Black in America. And Catholics, like others, still choose to flee the city for reasons of security and the good life. Problems resulting from poverty are profound and these tend to register alarm and indifference to the agonies of the minorities left behind

The Church remains the principal source of healing and hope for people with the race issue. We continue to need from the church prophets and agents of reconciliation, individuals and groups, laity and clergy who make it their responsibility to bring people together despite stubborn differences and the conflicts that would guarantee walls of separation.

This task has been the heart of the Christian mission in our society. Issues of race are the most urgent business of Church today to aid in annihilating stereotypes and nurturing mutual respect. Ultimately, our Christian faith is about building bridges between people, not walls.

Conversion of the Heart

The Catholic Bishops of Illinois, 2001

Conversion changes individuals, and individuals change society. Overcoming the sin of racism begins by opening ourselves to God's Spirit, who draws all to holiness. The Spirit makes each of us a member of the Body of Christ, and this spiritual relationship is the source of our hope for personal and social change. In Christ, we recognize racism as a division contrary to His will for His people, a division the Spirit will heal.

We place our trust in the promises of Christ and rely on his grace rather than on our own strength. It would be naive to think that racism will disappear overnight; it is too deeply embedded in the American experience. But change will come if we remain constant and never lose sight of the goal. The goal is visible when we see with the eyes of Christ, for our hope of ultimate victory is the Lord who desires that we be one in him.

We commit ourselves to speak the truth about racism. We commit ourselves to encouraging dialogue between African Americans and other Americans. Confident in the Lord, we invite all Catholics in Illinois and all men and women of good will, to join us in the struggle against racism so that, one day, we may all be free.

In God's Image; A Pastoral Letter on Racism,

Archbishop Harry Flynn, St. Paul/Minneapolis, 2003

Responding to the sin of racism must begin with each of us examining our own selves on this subject. We need to be open to a change of heart. We should ask God's Spirit to remove from us all traces of racial prejudice. We should avoid racial stereotypes, slurs and jokes. We should correct any expressions or racist attitudes among family members, friends, and co-workers. We should seek opportunities to know and learn from people of other races. Resisting racism also means examining our basic instincts and assumptions about race. How do these assumptions shape our daily lives?

What are our fears about people of other races? In what ways do we act differently when we drive through certain neighborhoods? How do we carry ourselves in situations where we interact with people of other races? Are we able to see Jesus in people whose skin color is different from ours or whose language is different from ours? I concur with my predecessor, Archbishop Roach, who said, "An appreciation of racial diversity begins with an understanding of how our own lives are affected by skin color and race. Each of us should examine how our thinking and our actions are influenced by the color of our skin. How has my skin color enhanced my life or hindered me, helped or prevented me from understanding people of other races? How can I enhance my own life by learning more about other races?"

Poverty and Racism: Threats to the Common Good,
Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M, 2007

Racism is the root of many evils, including poverty. Racism is so deeply entrenched in our American ethos, that it will take an extraordinary and superhuman effort to dislodge it, to eradicate it, for its taproot reaches deep down into the soul of our society. Let us pay attention to the newest victims of racial, ethnic and cultural bias, including the new pariah in our country, undocumented immigrants. The theme of *communio* is strong in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It has its origin in the Holy Trinity itself, and it was the most passionate desire expressed by Jesus before he died, "Father, that they be one as you and I are one." Unity is what we often pray for at Mass.

What distresses us today is a terribly divided world, separated by racial and religious lines as well as political and nationalistic attitudes. We need to show the world that even though we can be so different, we can be one in spirit. Our goal must be to bring to reality that which we express in the Eucharist. We break bread together and drink of the same cup, united around the same altar. What we do in liturgy should be a reflection of the unity in our lives.

Reflection Questions:

- What do the Scriptures tell us about the dignity of every human person?
- Why does the Church consider racism a sin?
- Why has the Church found it necessary to keep speaking out about racism?
- Why is it so crucial today to reject all forms of racism and discrimination?
- Why are racism and poverty so closely connected?
- When is racism more than a personal response?
- Why are we counseled to respect differences rather than overlook them?
- How do we as individuals, as institutions and as a society actively build bridges with people of different races and different cultures?
- What action can I take this month to affirm and respect difference and to reject discrimination?

Prayer

**God, you have created every person
In Your image.
Help us recognize this gift
By rejecting fear and
Rejecting the sin of racism,
So we can welcome and include all
Our brothers and sisters
As members of the human family.**

**Guide us through the words of
Our Church leadership.
Open our minds and our hearts
To discern how we can live together
In harmony and in unity.**

**Forgive us our sins,
What we have done
And what we have not done.
Make us active bridge builders,
To be witnesses
To your Word,
To the diversity
You have created and blessed.
Amen.**