



open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

To do justice requires an honest acknowledgment of our failures and the restoring of right relationships between us. “If we acknowledge our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing” (1 Jn 1:9). To love goodness demands pursuing “what leads to peace and to building up one another” (Rom 14:19). It requires a determined effort, but even more so, it requires humility; it requires each of us to ask for the grace needed to overcome this sin and get rid of this scourge. In what follows, we hope to provide a Christian call for all of us in this country to “walk humbly with our God” so that, by his grace, racism will be eradicated.

Do Justice

For a nation to be just, it must be a society that recognizes and respects the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples.¹⁰ These rights precede any society because they flow from the dignity granted to each person as created by God.¹¹ We are reminded of this fundamental truth in the earliest passages of the book of Genesis:

Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

God created mankind in his image;
in the image of God he created them;

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1930.

male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

From revelation, we know that the one God who created the human race is Triune, a communion of truth and love, and so by faith we recognize all the more clearly that human beings are, by their very nature, made for communion. Pope Benedict XVI noted, “As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God.”¹² We are meant to love God with our whole being, which then overflows into love for our neighbor. “Whoever loves God must love his brother” (1 Jn 4:21).

This is the original meaning of justice, where we are in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of God's creation. Justice was a gift of grace given to all of humanity. After sin entered the world, however, this sense of justice was overtaken by selfish desires, and we became inclined to sin.¹³ St. Augustine described well our lives after Eden, saying that in the fallen world our relationships with one another have been guided by a “lust to dominate.”¹⁴ Whether recognized or not, the history of the injustices done to so many, because of their race, flows from this “lust to dominate” the other. Even when we are freed from Original Sin by Baptism, we continue to struggle with overcoming temptation and sin in our lives.¹⁵

Although our nation has moved forward in a number of ways against racial discrimination, we have lost ground in others. Despite significant progress in civil law with

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 53.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 405.

¹⁴ St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book I, Preface.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 978.

regard to racism, societal realities indicate a need for further catechesis to facilitate conversion of hearts. Too many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life. We are not finished with the work. The evil of racism festers in part because, as a nation, there has been very limited formal acknowledgement of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation and, all too often a neglect of our history. Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us. We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just.

As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice. Many groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese, can attest to having been the target of racial and ethnic prejudice in this country. It is also true that many groups are still experiencing prejudice, including rising anti-Semitism, the discrimination many Hispanics face today, and anti-Muslim sentiment. Especially instructive at this moment, however, are the historical and contemporary experiences of Native and African Americans.

The Native American Experience

Before Europeans arrived, this land already had many diverse peoples upon it, with varying customs, languages, and beliefs. As explorers, and then pioneers, arrived, relations with

Native Americans also varied but were mostly to the detriment of Native peoples. Native Americans experienced deep wounds in the age of colonization and expansion, wounds that largely remain unhealed and strongly impact the generations to this day—a fact that St. John Paul II recognized when he met with Native peoples in 1987: “The early encounter between your traditional cultures and the European way of life was an event of such significance and change that it profoundly influences your collective life even today. That encounter was a harsh and painful reality for your peoples. The cultural oppression, the injustices, the disruption of your life and of your traditional societies must be acknowledged.”¹⁶

Many European settlers were blind to the dignity of indigenous peoples. Colonial and later U.S. policies toward Native American communities were often violent, paternalistic, and were directed toward the theft of their land. Native Americans were killed, imprisoned, sold into slavery, and raped. These policies decimated entire communities and brought about tragic death. The results were massive, forced relocations of people, such as the forced removal of the Cherokee people from the Southeast to the Western territories along the “Trail of Tears,” and of the Navajo in the “Long Walk.” Thousands of men, women, and children died during those forced removals. The forced relocation of peoples occurred again and again due to the idea that if the indigenous peoples “interfered with progress they should be pushed aside.”¹⁷ In many boarding schools and orphanages, the objective was to “Americanize” Native children by forcing

¹⁶ St. John Paul II, Address at the Meeting with the Native Peoples of the Americas, September 14, 1987, Phoenix, Arizona, no. 2.

¹⁷ U.S. Library of Congress, *The Indians of Southern California in 1852; The B. D. Wilson Report and a Selection of Contemporary Comment*, Ed. John Walton Caughey (Los Angeles: Plantin Press, 1952), 12. www.loc.gov/resource/calbk.051 (accessed May 31, 2018).

them to abandon all facets of their culture, including their native languages. In the words of the superintendent of one school, the goal was to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”¹⁸

During this time there were missions that stood as a barrier to the abuse of indigenous peoples and provided a form of protection in a rapidly changing reality. Although not all encounters with missionaries were benign, a number of missionaries heroically defended Native Americans as they sought to bring the Good News of Christ to many who had yet to hear it. The Jesuit Fr. Pierre-Jean de Smet and the Franciscan Anselm Weber, for example, worked tirelessly in supporting and promoting Native American rights. Earlier, St. Junipero Serra frequently clashed with civil authorities over the treatment of Native people. Many, but certainly not all, Native peoples accepted the Gospel willingly. For instance, St. Kateri Tekakwitha, Nicholas William Black Elk, Sr., and the martyrs of *La Florida* Missions were moved by Christ’s message of love, and by the example of Christians who honored their dignity.

Yet, in the order of natural justice, these acts done in the power of Christ’s Spirit are overshadowed by the devastation caused by policies of expansion and manifest destiny, fueled by racist attitudes, that led to the near eradication of Native American peoples and their cultures. The effects of this evil remain visible in the great difficulties experienced by Native American communities today. Poverty, unemployment, inadequate health care, poor schools, the exploitation of natural resources, and disputes over land ownership are all factors that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

¹⁸ Captain Richard H. Pratt, “On the Education of Native Americans,” Address to a Convention in 1892. The Carlisle Indian Industrial School Digital Resource Center. <http://carlisleindian.dickinson.edu/teach/kill-indian-and-save-man-capt-richard-h-pratt-education-native-americans> (accessed May 31, 2018).

The truth that we must face is straightforward. When one culture meets another, lack of awareness and understanding often leads to grossly distorted value judgments and prejudice. This prejudice fuels attitudes of superiority that are embedded in, and reinforced by, social structures and laws. This is evident in how white European immigrants and pioneers acted in their encounters with Native Americans; it is equally evident in the treatment of Africans who were enslaved and brought to the shores of America.

The African American Experience

As this country was forming, Africans were bought and sold as mere property, often beaten, raped, and literally worked to death. This form of slavery, known as chattel slavery, was different from and far more brutal than the slavery known in ancient times. Racial categories, which classified different ethnic communities as different races, some even as subhuman, were used to justify this new form of slavery. The injustices of chattel slavery were horrifying and lasted for generations. Families were separated, marriages were forbidden or dishonored, and children were maltreated and forced to work. After slavery ended, many former slaves faced continued servitude in the evolving economies that once relied upon their labor, and blacks encountered new forms of resentment and violence. In freedom, millions of blacks lived in constant fear for their lives. Most resided in extreme poverty and endured daily indignities in their interactions with whites. Efforts to advance out of poverty by working a small farm, owning a business, building a school, or forming a trade union generally met fierce resistance throughout the country. For so many, the right to participate in the political process would be withheld or severely hindered for another century.

Consistently, African Americans have been branded, by individuals, society, and even, at times, by members of the Church, with the message that they are inferior. Likewise, this message has been imprinted into the U.S. social subconscious. African Americans continue to struggle against perceptions that they do not fully bear the image of God, that they embody less intelligence, beauty, and goodness. This reality represents more than a few isolated stories; it was the lived experience of the vast majority of African Americans for most of our national history.

We acknowledge with gratitude the religious orders whose charism embodied evangelizing and caring for those who were marginalized and unwelcomed. We recall the bold witness of the Divine Word Missionaries, the Oblate Sisters of Providence, Sisters of the Holy Family, the Josephites, the Franciscan Handmaids of Mary, and the Blessed Sacrament Sisters. Likewise, countless individuals—Daniel Rudd, Thomas Wyatt Turner, Sr. Thea Bowman, and Dr. Lena Edwards to name a few—worked tirelessly against the prevailing current of racism to share the Catholic faith with persons of African descent.

Still, to understand how racism works today, we must recognize that generations of African Americans were disadvantaged by slavery, wage theft, “Jim Crow” laws, and by the systematic denial of access to numerous wealth-building opportunities reserved for others. This has left many African Americans without hope, discouraged, disheartened, and feeling unloved. While it is true that some individuals and families have thrived, significant numbers of African Americans are born into economic and social disparity.¹⁹ The poverty experienced by many of these communities has its roots in racist policies that continue to impede the ability of people to

¹⁹ See R. Kochhar and A. Cilluffo, “How wealth inequality has changed in the U.S. since the Great Recession, by race, ethnicity and income,” Pew Research Center, November 1, 2017. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/01/how-wealth-inequality-has-changed-in-the-u-s-since-the-great-recession-by-race-ethnicity-and-income/ (accessed May 31, 2018).

find affordable housing, meaningful work, adequate education, and social mobility.²⁰ The generational effects of slavery, segregation, and the systemic use of violence—including the lynching of more than 4,000 black men, women, and children across 800 different counties throughout the United States between 1877 and 1950²¹—are realities that must be fully recognized and addressed in any process that hopes to combat racism.

The Hispanic Experience

Of course, experiencing racism is not limited to African or Native Americans. Many different groups of people have encountered “in varying degrees the evil of discrimination, racial prejudice, and oppression that endangers the very fabric of American society.”²² Some of the same patterns of prejudice and discrimination have been repeated. At this time, we would be remiss not to highlight the experience of Hispanics in our country. Since the Mexican-American War, Hispanics from various countries have experienced discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Hispanics have been referred to by countless derogatory names, have encountered negative assumptions made about them because of their ethnicity, have suffered discrimination in applying for college, for housing, and in registering to vote. Despite their sizable share of the U.S. workforce and their numerous contributions to U.S. economy in many

²⁰ See USCCB Backgrounder, “Racism: Confronting the Poison in Our Common Home,” January 2016. www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/racism-backgrounder.pdf (accessed May 31, 2018).

²¹ Equal Justice Initiative, “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror, Third Edition,” Lynching in America—Equal Justice Initiative, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/> (accessed November 6, 2018).

²² USCCB, *Reconciled Through Christ: On Reconciliation and Greater Collaboration Between Hispanic American Catholics and African American Catholics* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1997), 4.

different fields and industries, the large income gap between Hispanic and European Americans points to the persistence of certain discriminatory practices in employment and pay.²³ In the not too distant past, Hispanics encountered signs in restaurants and shops that read, “No Mexicans or Blacks Allowed.” Moreover, there have been over 550 documented cases of Hispanics being lynched, and experts estimate that the number could actually be twice as large.²⁴

Hispanics are the major target of immigration raids and mass deportation. In the past, U.S. citizens of Hispanic descent caught up in these raids have been deported. Today, many Hispanics are often assumed to be in this country illegally. These attitudes of cultural superiority, indifference, and racism need to be confronted; they are unworthy of any follower of Christ.²⁵ After all, a large part of our nation consists of immigrants and their descendants. We must also remember that many people of Hispanic heritage come from families that were in this land long before the borders changed.

These examples from the experiences of Native, African, and Hispanic Americans demonstrate how, as a nation, we have never sufficiently contended with the impact of overt racism. Nor have we spent the necessary time to examine where the racist attitudes of yesterday have become a permanent part of our perceptions, practices, and policies of today, or how they have been enshrined in our social, political, and economic structures. Much can be learned in

²³ See R. Kochhar and A. Cilluffo, “How wealth inequality has changed in the U.S. since the Great Recession” Pew Research Center.

²⁴ See Nicholas Villanueva, *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2017). See also William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848-1928*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁵ Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), no. 40.

hearing the stories of those who have lived through the effects of racism. In examining the generational effects of racism on families, communities, and our Church, each of us can begin to act in solidarity to change the prospects for future generations.

Love Goodness

Most people would not consider themselves to be racist. A person might admit to being prejudiced but certainly not racist. As Christians, we know it is our duty to love others. St. Paul reminds us that we live by the Spirit, and the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23). We must be honest with ourselves. Each of us should examine our conscience and ask if these fruits are really present in our attitudes about race. Or, rather, do our attitudes reflect mistrust, impatience, anger, distress, discomfort, or rancor?

When we begin to separate people in our thoughts for unjust reasons, when we start to see some people as “them” and others as “us,” we fail to love. Yet love is at the heart of the Christian life. When approached and asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39). This command of love can never be simply “live and let others be.” The command of love requires us to make room for others in our hearts. It means that we are indeed our brother’s keeper (see Gn 4:9).

The sin of Cain finds its remedy in Christ, in his command to love and in the gift of his Holy Spirit that enables us to respond to his call. When Cain struck and killed his brother, the human family was further divided. But Christ heals all divisions, including those that are at the