



open wide our hearts

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

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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

core of racism. It is through his Cross that we learn the greatest lesson about love. On the Cross, Jesus died for the human race (see 2 Cor 5:15). “He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:2). Here is our hope! Here is the grace given to us to be healed of this sin of division! Here is the lesson of love.

Once “we have come to the conviction that one died for all”—and not just for ourselves—then “the love of Christ impels us” to see others as our brothers and sisters (2 Cor 5:14). For, “if [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy” (1 Cor 12:26). It is the love of Christ that binds together the Church, and this love reaches out beyond the Church to all peoples. This love also requires justice. “If we love others with charity,” as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, “then first of all we are just toward them.”²⁶ In this way, love “is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace.”²⁷ In doing so, we are also loving goodness.

The Urgent Call of Love

Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist. Overcoming racism is a demand of justice, but because Christian love transcends justice, the end of racism will mean that our community will bear fruit beyond simply the fair treatment of all. After all,

²⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 6.

²⁷ *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 1.

“Within [the human] family,” as St. John Paul II said, “each people preserves and expresses its own identity and enriches others with its gifts of culture.”²⁸

Our faith gives us a treasury of inspiring holy men and women who courageously worked toward racial reconciliation, showing us the way forward. There is, for example, the Servant of God Augustus Tolton, who was born into slavery and escaped to the free state of Illinois. Despite a strong calling to the priesthood supported by clergy who knew his faith, all the seminaries in the United States rejected him. Having eventually made it to a seminary in Rome, he was ordained, and returned to serve as the first black priest born in the United States, where, again, he faced much discrimination and racism.

Once home and ministering to the People of God, Fr. Tolton was tormented by others, especially by a brother priest who was white. This priest made public and ugly statements urging the white people of the city not to go to Fr. Tolton’s parish. Through this long persecution, Fr. Tolton exhibited the love of Christ, forgiving what was done to him and continuing to serve others. Things got so bad, however, that Fr. Tolton accepted an invitation from Archbishop Feehan to move north to Chicago, where he served the faithful until his death in 1897. Fr. Tolton often spoke of how the Church had taught him to always “pray and forgive my persecutors.”²⁹

During his ministry, Fr. Tolton corresponded with Mother (now Saint) Katharine Drexel, who helped support his parish work in Chicago. She is another example of people working for racial reconciliation. Following a directive from Pope Leo XIII in 1887, St. Katharine dedicated her life to working closely with Native Americans and African Americans, exhibiting genuine

²⁸ St. John Paul II, Address at the Meeting with the Native Peoples of the Americas, September 14, 1987, no. 4.

²⁹ Address to the first Catholic Colored Congress, Washington, D.C., January 1-4, 1889.

respect and concern. By the time of her death in 1955, St. Katharine had more than 500 sisters working in 63 schools and had established 50 missions for Native Americans in 16 states. She also founded 50 schools for African American students, including Xavier University of Louisiana, the first and only Catholic university in the United States established specifically for African Americans. Her motivation was clear. As she said, “If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and them. Let us open wide our hearts. It is joy which invites us. Press forward and fear nothing.”³⁰

Walk Humbly with God

To press forward without fear means “to walk humbly with God” in rebuilding our relationships, healing our communities, and working to shape our policies and institutions toward the good of all, as missionary disciples. Evangelization, which is the work of the Church, “means not only preaching but witnessing; not only conversion but renewal; not only entry into the community but the building up of the community.”³¹ Racism is a moral problem that requires a moral remedy—a transformation of the human heart—that impels us to act. The power of this type of transformation will be a strong catalyst in eliminating those injustices that impinge on human dignity. As Christians, we know this to be true, for with “God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). It is the Lord who, by his grace, forgives and restores us to these relationships and heals the wounds between us. After all, the aim of

³⁰ “A Eucharistic Focused Mission,” Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament. www.katharinedrexel.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FocusedMissionBro.pdf (accessed Aug. 23, 2018).

³¹ *What We Have Seen and Heard*, A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States (St. Anthony Messenger Press: Sept. 9, 1984), 2.