



open wide our hearts

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

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Holy Scripture boldly proclaims, “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are” (1 Jn 3:1). This love “comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15:28).”¹ By the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church is called to share with all the world this gift of love. As Pope Francis points out, “The salvation which God has wrought, and the Church joyfully proclaims, is for everyone. God has found a way to unite himself to every human being in every age.”² Through his Cross and Resurrection, Christ united the one human race to the Father. However, even though Christ’s victory over sin and death is complete, we still live in a world affected by them. As bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States, we want to address one particularly destructive and persistent form of evil. Despite many promising strides made in our country, racism still infects our nation.

What Is Racism?

Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful. Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice. They reveal a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended, to recognize them as the neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt 22:39).

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 113.

Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred. Cain forgets this truth in his hatred of his brother. Recall the words in the First Letter of John: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him” (1 Jn 3:15). Racism shares in the same evil that moved Cain to kill his brother. It arises from suppressing the truth that his brother Abel was also created in the image of God, a human equal to himself. Every racist act—every such comment, every joke, every disparaging look as a reaction to the color of skin, ethnicity, or place of origin—is a failure to acknowledge another person as a brother or sister, created in the image of God. In these and in many other such acts, the sin of racism persists in our lives, in our country, and in our world.

Racism comes in many forms. It can be seen in deliberate, sinful acts. In recent times, we have seen bold expressions of racism by groups as well as individuals. The re-appearance of symbols of hatred, such as nooses and swastikas in public spaces, is a tragic indicator of rising racial and ethnic animus. All too often, Hispanics and African Americans, for example, face discrimination in hiring, housing, educational opportunities, and incarceration. Racial profiling frequently targets Hispanics for selective immigration enforcement practices, and African Americans, for suspected criminal activity. There is also the growing fear and harassment of persons from majority Muslim countries. Extreme nationalist ideologies are feeding the American public discourse with xenophobic rhetoric that instigates fear against foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. Finally, too often racism comes in the form of the sin of omission, when individuals, communities, and even churches remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when it is encountered.

Racism can often be found in our hearts—in many cases placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture. As such, it can lead to thoughts and actions that we do not even see as racist, but nonetheless flow from the same prejudicial root. Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits. Racism can also be institutional, when practices or traditions are upheld that treat certain groups of people unjustly. The cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that makes us all accomplices in racism.³

We read the headlines that report the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement officials. In our prisons, the number of inmates of color, notably those who are brown and black, is grossly disproportionate.⁴ Despite the great blessings of liberty that this country offers, we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger. At the same time, we reject harsh rhetoric that belittles and dehumanizes law enforcement personnel who labor to keep our communities safe. We also condemn violent attacks against police.

³ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1869.

⁴ The Pew Research Center reports, “The racial and ethnic makeup of U.S. prisons continues to look substantially different from the demographics of the country as a whole. In 2016, blacks represented 12% of the U.S. adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population. Whites accounted for 64% of adults but 30% of prisoners. And while Hispanics represented 16% of the adult population, they accounted for 23% of inmates.” See John Gramlich, “The gap between the number of blacks and whites in prison is shrinking,” January 12, 2018. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/12/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/ (accessed May 31, 2018).

We have also seen years of systemic racism working in how resources are allocated to communities that remain *de facto* segregated. As an example, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, resulted from policy decisions that negatively affected the inhabitants, the majority of whom were African Americans.⁵ We could go on, for the instances of discrimination, prejudice, and racism, sadly, are too many.

At significant times in our history, the bishops have written to express their pastoral concern over the scourge of racism, which some have called our country's original sin. In 1958, the bishops wrote to condemn the blatant forms of racism found in segregation and "Jim Crow" laws.⁶ Ten years later, they wrote to condemn the scandal of racism and the policies and actions that led to so much frustration that violence erupted in many cities.⁷ In 1979, the bishops wrote on how racism still affected so many of our brothers and sisters, highlighting the structural and institutional forms of racial injustice evident in the economic imbalances found in our society.⁸

With the positive changes that arose from the civil rights movement and related civil rights legislation, some may believe that racism is no longer a major affliction of our society—that it is only found in the hearts of individuals who can be dismissed as ignorant or unenlightened. But racism still profoundly affects our culture, and it has no place in the Christian heart. This evil causes great harm to its victims, and it corrupts the souls of those who harbor

⁵ See Michigan Civil Rights Commission Report, "The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint," Michigan Department of Civil Rights Website, February 17, 2017. www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcr/VFlintCrisisRep-F-Edited3-13-17_554317_7.pdf (accessed August 10, 2018).

⁶ USCCB, *Discrimination and Christian Conscience*, November 14, 1958.

⁷ USCCB, *National Race Crisis*, April 25, 1968.

⁸ USCCB, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, November 14, 1979.

racist or prejudicial thoughts. The persistence of the evil of racism is why we are writing this letter now. People are still being harmed, so action is still needed.

What is needed, and what we are calling for, is a genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society. Conversion is a long road to travel for the individual. Moving our nation to a full realization of the promise of liberty, equality, and justice *for all* is even more challenging. However, in Christ we can find the strength and the grace necessary to make that journey.

In this regard, each of us should adopt the words of Pope Francis as our own: let no one “think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.”⁹ All of us are in need of personal, ongoing conversion. Our churches and our civic and social institutions are in need of ongoing reform. If racism is confronted by addressing its causes and the injustice it produces, then healing can occur. In that transformed reality, the headlines we see all too often today will become lessons from the past.

How do we overcome this evil of rejecting a brother or sister’s humanity, the same evil that provoked Cain’s sin? What are the necessary steps that would lead to this conversion? We find our inspiration in the words of the prophet Micah:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mi 6:8)

⁹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 3.

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.