



open wide our hearts

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

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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.

salvation history is reconciliation and entering the heavenly Jerusalem, a communion of all peoples and all nations.

To press forward without fear also means cooperating with God’s grace by taking direct and deliberate steps for change. It means opening doorways where once only walls stood. As bishops, we commit ourselves to the following actions with the hope that others, especially those in our spiritual care, will do likewise in their own lives and communities.

Acknowledging Sin

Examining our sinfulness—individually, as the Christian community, and as a society—is a humbling experience. Only from a place of humility can we look honestly at past failures, ask for forgiveness, and move toward healing and reconciliation. This requires us to *acknowledge* sinful deeds and thoughts, and to *ask* for forgiveness. The truth is that the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have been complicit in the evil of racism.³² In his Papal Bull *Dum Diversas* (1452), Nicholas V granted apostolic permission for the kings of Spain and Portugal to buy and sell Africans, setting the stage for the slave trade. Even though subsequent popes strongly renounced and rejected the international slave trade, much to our shame, many American religious leaders, including Catholic bishops, failed to formally oppose slavery; some even owned slaves.

We also realize the ways that racism has permeated the life of the Church and persists to a degree even today. “For too long,” in the Church’s missions throughout the world, “the way to

³² St. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 33: “Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance: before God and man, *she always acknowledges as her own her sinful sons and daughters.*”

a fully indigenous clergy and religious was blocked by an attitude that was paternalistic and racist.”³³ Not long ago, in many Catholic parishes, people of color were relegated to segregated seating, and required to receive the Holy Eucharist after white parishioners. All too often, leaders of the Church have remained silent about the horrific violence and other racial injustices perpetuated against African Americans and others.

Therefore we, the Catholic bishops in the United States, acknowledge the many times when the Church has failed to live as Christ taught—to love our brothers and sisters.³⁴ Acts of racism have been committed by leaders and members of the Catholic Church—by bishops, clergy, religious, and laity—and her institutions. We express deep sorrow and regret for them. We also acknowledge those instances when we have not done enough or stood by silently when grave acts of injustice were committed. We ask for forgiveness from all who have been harmed by these sins committed in the past or in the present.

Being Open to Encounter and New Relationships

“To walk humbly with God” requires even more. We know that we do not have all the answers, but a missionary disciple is one who willingly meets every problem and every sinful attitude with the confidence that comes from a deep love of Jesus. As Pope Benedict XVI has

³³ *What We Have Seen and Heard* (Sept. 9, 1984), 21.

³⁴ See International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation*, no. 3.3, which quotes Augustine, *Sermon* 181, 5,7: “The Church as a whole says: Forgive us our trespasses! Therefore, she has blemishes and wrinkles. But by means of confession the wrinkles are smoothed away and the blemishes washed clean. The Church stands in prayer in order to be purified by confession and, as long as men live on earth it will be so.”

said, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”³⁵

The Christian community should draw from this central, ongoing encounter with Christ and seek to combat racism with love, recalling the insight of Pope Francis that “if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?”³⁶ With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this wellspring of strength and courage must move us to act. Consequently, we all need to take responsibility for correcting the injustices of racism and healing the harms it has caused.

To work at ending racism, we need to engage the world and encounter others—to see, maybe for the first time, those who are on the peripheries of our own limited view. Knowing that the Lord has taken the divine initiative by loving us first, we can boldly go forward, reaching out to others. We must invite into dialogue those we ordinarily would not seek out. We must work to form relationships with those we might regularly try to avoid. This demands that we go beyond ourselves, opening our minds and hearts to value and respect the experiences of those who have been harmed by the evil of racism. Love also requires us to invite a change of heart in those who may be dismissive of other’s experiences or whose hearts may be hardened by prejudice or racism. Only by forging authentic relationships can we truly see each other as Christ sees us. Love should then move us to take what we learn from our encounters and examine where society continues to fail our brothers and sisters, or where it perpetuates inequity, and seek to address those problems.

³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 8.

Resolving to Work for Justice

To foster, in part, such encounters, and to express our strong and renewed resolve to work for justice, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops formed an Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism. The committee has already begun its work—conducting listening sessions; providing resources about racism; giving tools to dioceses, eparchies, and parishes to begin important conversations about this evil; and exploring needed policy initiatives. We charge this Ad Hoc Committee to implement the vision of this pastoral letter. Furthermore, this committee is to develop ways to help facilitate an ongoing national dialogue, bringing successful models and stories of hope to people at all levels. We also task the leadership of our bishops' conference to seek meaningful opportunities that deepen understanding, foster reconciliation, and publicly witness to the Church's commitment to ending racism. We commit all the offices and committees of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to be ever mindful of this imperative.

Nationally, taking concrete action should include advocating for equality in how laws are implemented and advocating for moral budgets that reduce barriers to economic well-being, appropriate healthcare, education, and training. We can also learn from the example of other countries, such as South Africa, Germany, and Rwanda, and from certain institutions that have recognized past wrongs and have come to understand the truth of their history.

Locally, including in our own parishes, practical plans should be made to provide further opportunities for qualified candidates who historically have been excluded, such as through hiring and contracting practices. Likewise, within our dioceses, taking concrete action entails that struggling parishes, schools, and organizations receive resources and

training for catechesis, youth ministry, and other pastoral needs. It also means providing necessary support to families, seniors, and ex-offenders.

In addition, “To overcome discrimination, a community must interiorize the values that inspire just laws and live out, in day-to-day life, the conviction of the equal dignity of all.”³⁷ Therefore, we affirm that participating in or fostering organizations that are built on racist ideology (for instance, neo-Nazi movements and the Ku Klux Klan) is also sinful—they corrupt individuals and corrode communities. None of these organizations have a place in a just society.

Educating Ourselves

As bishops, we encourage our leadership to make formal visits to institutions of culture and learning, to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the National Museum of the American Indian, and the Holocaust Museum—all in Washington, D.C.—and the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta, for example. Similar opportunities should be encouraged in our local communities. Parishes, for instance, could use the National Day of Prayer for Peace in Our Communities, which falls on the feast of St. Peter Claver (September 9), to organize activities that foster community, dialogue, and reconciliation. These encounters will help open our minds and hearts more fully and continue the healing needed in our communities and our nation. By listening to one another’s experiences, we can come to understand and to empathize, which leads to those right relationships that unite us as

³⁷ Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society* (1988), no. 24.

brothers and sisters. This justice finds its source and strength in the love of Christ who laid down his life for his friends (see Jn 15:13).

“A change of heart,” the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace points out, “cannot occur without strengthening spiritual convictions regarding respect for other races and ethnic groups.”³⁸ We must, therefore, form the consciences of our people, especially the young, “by clearly presenting the entire Christian doctrine on this subject. [We] particularly [ask] pastors, preachers, teachers and catechists to explain the true teaching of Scripture and Tradition about the origin of all people in God, their final common destiny in the Kingdom of God, the value of the precept of fraternal love, and the total incompatibility between racist exclusivism and the universal calling of all to the same salvation in Jesus Christ.”³⁹

Here we call on our religious education programs, Catholic schools, and Catholic publishing companies to develop curricula relating to racism and reconciliation. Our campus ministers should plan young adult reflections and discussions that strive to build pathways toward racial equality and healing. We can also learn from the example of those young people who rise above racist attitudes and model respect. We also charge our seminaries, deacon formation programs, houses of formation, and all our educational institutions to break any silence around the issue of racism, to find new and creative ways to raise awareness, analyze curricula, and to teach the virtues of fraternal charity.

Our individual efforts to encounter, grow, and witness, to change our hearts about racism, must also find their way into our families. We urge each person to consider the dignity of others in the face of jokes, conversations, and complaints motivated by racial

³⁸ *The Church and Racism*, no. 25.

³⁹ *The Church and Racism*, no. 25.

prejudice. We can provide experiences for children that expose them to different cultures and peoples. We can also draw upon the incredible diversity of the Church worldwide in providing education within the family and make it clear that God dwells in the equal dignity of each person. We ask all the faithful to consider ways in which they and their families can encounter, grow, and witness through an understanding and commitment to these values today. In turn, we pledge to provide tools and resources to facilitate those efforts.

Working in Our Churches

Of course, racism will not end overnight. Still, we pledge these actions and hope that more actions will follow. We instruct our priests, deacons, religious brothers and sisters, lay leaders, our parish staffs, and all the faithful to endeavor to be missionary disciples carrying forth the message of fraternal charity and human dignity. We ask them to fight the evil of racism by educating themselves, reflecting on their personal thoughts and actions, listening to the experience of those who have been affected by racism, and by developing and supporting programs that help repair the damages caused by racial discrimination. We need to continue to educate ourselves and our people about the great cultural diversity within our Church. One way to do this is to support actively the cause for canonization of the first African American saint. We can also promote knowledge of the martyrs, blessed, and saints of the different cultural groups and nationalities present in our midst, and propose them as models of faith for the entire Church. So many of our parishes are richly diverse, composed of people from various cultures and ethnic groups, such that they can be a model for the whole Church and for the country. We will redouble our efforts to promote vocations to marriage, priesthood, and religious life—especially within communities of color—so as to better reflect all of the

People of God. We commit to preach with regularity homilies directed to the issue of racism and its impact on our homes, families, and neighborhoods, particularly on certain feast days and national holidays. We direct our priests and deacons to do the same. We call on theologians to help us address these issues as well. In this task, it is essential to understand, and to help others see, how racism diminishes everyone—society as a whole—and not just those who are directly affected by it.

Changing Structures

The roots of racism have extended deeply into the soil of our society. Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality—economic and social—that we still see all around us. With renewed vigor, we call on the members of the Body of Christ to join others in advocating and promoting policies at all levels that will combat racism and its effects in our civic and social institutions. “Even in the developed world,” Pope Francis told members of the U.S. Congress, “the effects of unjust structures and actions are all too apparent. Our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples.”⁴⁰

Certainly, we cannot accomplish this task alone. We call on everyone, especially all Christians and those of other faith traditions, to help repair the breach caused by racism, which damages the human family. Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation has been pivotal at key moments in our history, for instance, in the abolition of slavery and during the civil rights era. The leadership of the civil rights movement, especially that of Rev. Martin Luther

⁴⁰ Pope Francis, Address to the U.S. Congress, Sept. 24, 2015.

King, Jr., invited ecumenical and interreligious cooperation, as was seen when Catholics, Protestants, and Jews marched together. That spirit is integral to the fight today, and in some communities, the success of this effort will very much depend on this kind of collaboration. As religious leaders, we must continue this tradition.

Conversion of All

As St. Paul proclaimed, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost. But for that reason, I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life” (1 Tm 1:15-16). St. Paul’s own conversion is a powerful reminder of how God’s grace can transform even the hardest of hearts. Prayer and working toward conversion must be our first response in the face of evil actions. “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance” (Lk 15:7). Therefore, we must never limit our understanding of God’s power to bring about the conversion of even those whose hearts appear completely frozen by the sin of racism. Our communities must never cease to invite and encourage them in love to abandon these sinful thoughts and destructive ways.

Conversion is an essential aspect of evangelization, which “is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment.”⁴¹ Like St. Paul, this requires us to examine our most deeply held “values, [our]

⁴¹ St. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 19.

points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life”—all that may be “in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.”⁴²

Our Commitment to Life

The injustice and harm racism causes are an attack on human life. The Church in the United States has spoken out consistently and forcefully against abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, and other forms of violence that threaten human life. It is not a secret that these attacks on human life have severely affected people of color, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, targeted for abortion, have less access to healthcare, have the greatest numbers on death row, and are most likely to feel pressure to end their lives when facing serious illness. As bishops, we unequivocally state that racism is a life issue. Accordingly, we will not cease to speak forcefully against and work toward ending racism. Racism directly places brother and sister against each other, violating the dignity inherent in each person. The Apostle James commands the Christian: “show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas 2:1).

Going Forward

Almost thirty years ago, St. John Paul II reminded us just what is at stake. Each person “is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life.”⁴³ We are all called to

⁴² *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 19.

⁴³ St. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 2.

that great life, to the communion of heaven where “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue [stand] before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). That Lamb, Christ, showed us that the very life of God is love, and love requires something of each of us. We pray that the reader will join us in striving for the end of racism in all its forms, that we may walk together humbly with God and with all of our brothers and sisters in a renewed unity. For there is no place for racism in the hearts of any person; it is a perversion of the Lord’s will for men and women, all of whom were made in God’s image and likeness. We end by adopting the words of St. Paul: Brothers and sisters, “be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong. Your every act should be done with love” (1 Cor 16:13-14).

As in all things, we turn to prayer, asking Our Blessed Mother to intercede on our behalf:

Mary, friend and mother to all,
through your Son, God has found a way
to unite himself to every human being,
called to be one people,
sisters and brothers to each other.

We ask for your help in calling on your Son,
seeking forgiveness for the times when
we have failed to love and respect one another.

We ask for your help in obtaining from your Son
the grace we need to overcome the evil of racism

and to build a just society.

We ask for your help in following your Son,
so that prejudice and animosity
will no longer infect our minds or hearts
but will be replaced with a love that respects
the dignity of each person.

Mother of the Church,
the Spirit of your Son Jesus
warms our hearts:
pray for us.