

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND RACISM

► Statements and Reflection Prompts
Our Lady of the Presentation Church

SOME HISTORY

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

As is noted in St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians, from our earliest days the Church has opposed racism: "through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus....There is neither Greek nor Jew, free or slave, there is not male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:26–28 St. Paul's letter to Philemon serves as another example, in which Paul invites Philemon to receive his former slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ. Prior to the establishment of Christianity, Isaiah wrote: *Is this not, rather, the fast that I choose:releasing those bound unjustly,untying the thongs of the yoke;Setting free the oppressed,breaking off every yoke?* (Isaiah 58:6)

02

COLONIZATION OF THE AMERICAS

In 1435, Pope Eugene IV issued a Papal Bull, *Sicut Dudum*, condemned the enslavement of African Christians in the Canary Islands. This followed a prior bull threatened excommunication for slavers. Pope Sixtus IV followed with *Regimini Gregis*, excommunicating those participating in slave trade.



REFLECTION

THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

In what ways have you experienced the welcoming of people of different cultures, genders, religions to participate in parish life?

Which words of St. Paul challenge you most? Why?

03

COLONIZATION OF THE AMERICAS

Despite the strong messages from Popes of the time, colonization of the Americas was often led and financially supported by Catholics.

What steps can we take, individually and communally, to avoid the continued exploitation of marginalized people in our world and community?



SOME HISTORY

THEORIES OF SUB-HUMAN RACES

What groups in our world are currently treated as sub-human?
How can this treatment be changed to be just?

04



SOME HISTORY

CATHOLICS AND RACISM IN THE MODERN UNITED STATES

Despite the pleas and moral arguments of pontiffs, in the United States, the systematic eradication of Native Americans, the persistence of racism in the form of segregation and Jim Crow laws were often supported by Catholic leaders. The desegregation of most Catholic Schools did not happen until after Brown v. Board of Education, and even today many Catholic communities lack diversity.

05

During the 1960s, there were isolated groups of Catholics, basing their actions on the Social Justice teachings of the Church, who acted in solidarity with the Black community. PBS documented one facet of this in their documentary, "Sisters of Selma," published in 2007.

Though an unpopular decision, in 1947, Cardinal John Ritter integrated all Catholic schools in St. Louis. In Kansas City, beginning in 1947, Catholic schools were integrated by Archbishop Edwin V. O'Hara, who also integrated Catholic hospitals.

Nonetheless, it is evident in our own times, despite more recent calls for reconciliation and love, that racism is alive and well in our nation and in the hearts and actions of many Catholics.



OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS

Open Wide Our Hearts is the 2018 pastoral letter of the United States' bishops addressing the issue of racism. The letter is divided into three sections, based on Micah:6:8: *the Lord requires you to do justice, love goodness and walk humbly with God.*

The Letter begins by establishing what racism is:

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)

06

Our bishops suggest a personal Examination of Conscience as we begin this study.

How have you, in your own life, witnessed the exclusion, ridicule, mistreatment or injustice of people due to their race or ethnicity? How have you responded? In what ways have you sinned in this regard, by deliberate acts or omission?



OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS

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 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. heart. (p. 7)

- Where have you witnessed institutional racism?
- Why is racism at odds with the Christian vision for our families, communities and society?



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. (p. 8)

Justice means we are in right relationship with God, with one another and with Creation.

*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.***

Why is it important to “hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the hearts of our brothers and sisters” who have experienced racism?

What stories have you heard that have expanded your own perspective?

If you have heard stories that broadened your perspective, how do you retain the lessons you have learned from those stories?

How does racism influence U.S. immigration policy?



DO JUSTICE

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 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. (p.16)

09

What are some of the practices and policies of today that are based on racist attitudes?

In what ways – small or large – can you help change these practices/policies?

What do you know about the practice of slavery?

What do you know about the history of Native Americans in the US?

How much do you know about the Hispanic experience in the United States?



LOVE GOODNESS

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). (p.17)

10

[Click on the document: Prophetic Witness on our website for some inspiration.](#)



LOVE GOODNESS

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,

11

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

27 Caritas in Veritate, no. 1.

19

“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



LOVE GOODNESS

How are you “opening wide” your heart and responding to Jesus’s command of love?
Does your prayer life reflect a response to Jesus’s command of love?

Do you believe that Jesus really can heal the divisions and wounds caused by racism in an individual? In a community? On a national level?

How might you be called to help others recognize racism affecting our communities?

5. In what ways does combating racism require overcoming racial prejudice and challenging social structures that subtly embody and reinforce racism?



WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

In walking humbly with God, we are called to be the bridge between the realities of our world and God's desire that we love our neighbor.

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. (p. 20)



WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

What is the relationship between evangelization and racism?

How is fighting racism part of missionary discipleship? How will an encounter with Christ help individuals combat racism?

Based on which wrongs do the bishops acknowledge the Catholic Church has been complicit in perpetuating racism?

14

The bishops state that racism is a life issue. Why is racism a life issue?

In your opinion, what are the three most critical actions that the Church and its members should take to end racism internally? What should racial justice look like in the Church, specifically in parishes, schools, and organizations?

What are the three most critical actions that should be taken in the wider society?



POPE FRANCIS

In his June 3 General Audience, Pope Francis devoted part of his talk to the cause of racism, especially in the United States, saying:

I greet the English-speaking faithful joining us through the media. Dear brothers and sisters in the United States, I have witnessed with great concern the disturbing social unrest in your nation in these past days, following the tragic death of Mr George Floyd. My friends, we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life. At the same time, we have to recognize that “the violence of recent nights is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost”. Today I join the Church in Saint Paul and Minneapolis, and in the entire United States, in praying for the repose of the soul of George Floyd and of all those others who have lost their lives as a result of the sin of racism. Let us pray for the consolation of their grieving families and friends and let us implore the national reconciliation and peace for which we yearn. May Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America, intercede for all those who work for peace and justice in your land and throughout the world.

What is your reaction to Pope Francis' words?

Have you taken time to pray for George Floyd and his family, along with others who experience the sin of racism?

How is racism a violation of the sacredness of human life?



ARCHBISHOP GOMEZ

Speaking as the President of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Jose Gomez issued this statement decrying the sin of racism, particularly in regard to the killing of George Floyd while also noting that burning and looting communities does not advance the cause of racial equality and human dignity:

The killing of George Floyd was senseless and brutal, a sin that cries out to heaven for justice. How is it possible that in America, a black man's life can be taken from him while calls for help are not answered, and his killing is recorded as it happens? I am praying for George Floyd and his loved ones, and on behalf of my brother bishops, I share the outrage of the black community and those who stand with them in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and across the country. The cruelty and violence he suffered does not reflect on the majority of good men and women in law enforcement, who carry out their duties with honor. We know that.

How did you respond, emotionally and rationally to the reports of George Floyd's arrest and death?

Do you share the outrage of the black community? Why or why not?



ARCHBISHOP GOMEZ

We trust that civil authorities will investigate his killing carefully and make sure those responsible are held accountable. We should all understand that the protests we are seeing in our cities reflect the justified frustration and anger of millions of our brothers and sisters who even today experience humiliation, indignity, and unequal opportunity only because of their race or the color of their skin. It should not be this way in America.

Racism has been tolerated for far too long in our way of life. It is true what Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, that riots are the language of the unheard. We should be doing a lot of listening right now. This time, we should not fail to hear what people are saying through their pain. We need to finally root out the racial injustice that still infects too many areas of American society. But the violence of recent nights is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost. Let us keep our eyes on the prize of true and lasting change. Legitimate protests should not be exploited by persons who have different values and agendas. Burning and looting communities, ruining the livelihoods of our neighbors, does not advance the cause of racial equality and human dignity. We should not let it be said that George Floyd died for no reason. We should honor the sacrifice of his life by removing racism and hate from our hearts and renewing our commitment to fulfill our nation's sacred promise – to be a beloved community of life, liberty, and equality for all.

Who are you listening to during this time?

In what ways do you see the humiliation, indignity and unequal opportunity in our country for people of color? How do you react to the statement: Black Lives Matter? Why?



STATEMENT OF USCCCB COMMITTEE CHAIRS

We are broken-hearted, sickened, and outraged to watch another video of an African American man being killed before our very eyes. What's more astounding is that this is happening within mere weeks of several other such occurrences. This is the latest wake-up call that needs to be answered by each of us in a spirit of determined conversion.

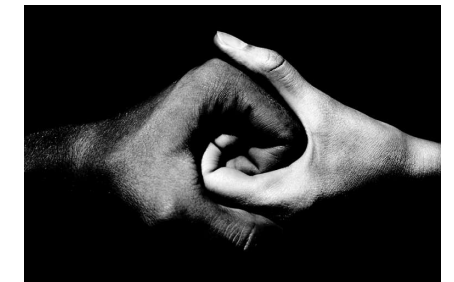
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Racism is not a thing of the past or simply a throwaway political issue to be bandied about when convenient. It is a real and present danger that must be met head on. As members of the Church, we must stand for the more difficult right and just actions instead of the easy wrongs of indifference.

We cannot turn a blind eye to these atrocities and yet still try to profess to respect every human life. We serve a God of love, mercy, and justice. While it is expected that we will plead for peaceful non-violent protests, and we certainly do, we also stand in passionate support of communities that are understandably outraged. Too many communities around this country feel their voices are not being heard, their complaints about racist treatment are unheeded, and we are not doing enough to point out that this deadly treatment is antithetical to the Gospel of Life.

Do you see racism as a "real and present danger" in our nation? In what ways?

What actions and words will you commit to as an individual or as a family to move from indifference to solidarity?



THE BISHOPS OF MISSOURI

We, the Catholic bishops of Missouri, wish to express our anger and sadness at the senseless death of George Floyd. This tragedy tears open a wound that hasn't completely healed in Missouri following the death of Michael Brown. It also once again opens up our state and nation to unnecessary violence and destruction. We wish to clearly state that we denounce police brutality in any form, especially in any form motivated by racism, or by a disregard for persons based upon the color of their skin. We also denounce violence and property destruction as a means of countering violence. We must find a way to live peacefully together, respecting the racial and ethnic differences among us. Racial and ethnic injustice continues to exist in our state and in our country, and we cannot turn a blind eye to it. We must ask ourselves what systemic changes are needed to address it.

18

We must also honestly examine our hearts and ask God to eradicate any vestige of it that might lie there. We cannot do this on our own. No human power can eradicate racism; we need the assistance of a higher power. We call upon Catholics and people of good will to pray for an end to racism, bias, and prejudice within ourselves and within our communities. Recalling the gift of Pentecost celebrated this past weekend, through which God sends the Holy Spirit to unite a scattered and divided human family, may the Holy Spirit guide us into all truth concerning the dignity of every human person, and may Jesus Christ gather us together into fellowship with the Father.

What similarities and differences do you see in the statements of the Pope, Archbishop Gomez, the USCCB and the Bishops' of Missouri?

Have you noticed any significant change in attitudes and behaviors of Missourians since the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri?

