



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.

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

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.

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.