

Peace Cannot Exist Apart from Justice: A Racial Justice Reflection on *Magnifica Humanitas*

“Humanity, created by God in all its grandeur, is today facing a pivotal choice: either to construct a new Tower of Babel or to build the city in which God and humanity dwell together”
(*Magnifica Humanitas*, no.1)

In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV calls the entire human family to “love justice and peace” (*MH*, no. 240). Reading this encyclical through the lens of racial justice, we are moved to reflect on both the urgency and the hope embedded in the Holy Father’s words. As a Shepherd of the Church in the United States, and as Chairman of the Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation, and the Subcommittee on African American Affairs, we feel a deep pastoral responsibility to continue lifting up the call to justice within both our Church and our society.

We are particularly grateful for the Holy Father’s acknowledgment of the Church’s historical failures for the sin of slavery and his sincere apology on behalf of the Church. As he writes, the Church has come to a deeper awareness of the dignity of every human person, even while recognizing the delay with which both society and the Church came to denounce the scourge of slavery:

“In the development of her doctrine, the Church has gradually come to a deeper awareness of the gravity of these issues. It is true that past events cannot be judged anachronistically, as though the moral criteria that matured over time had always been available. Yet neither can we deny or diminish the delay with which both society and the Church came to denounce the scourge of slavery. In antiquity and the Middle Ages many individuals and even ecclesiastical institutions had slaves. Already in the early modern period, the Apostolic See of Rome, responding to requests from Sovereigns, intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation, and, in certain cases, the enslavement of “infidels.” It was only in the nineteenth century that a formal, absolute and universal condemnation of slavery was clearly articulated, notably under Pope Leo XIII. This development offers a clear example of the Church’s growth in understanding the perennial truths of Revelation that she safeguards. Although there was not always consistency in practice — given that slavery was long tolerated before being unequivocally condemned — there has been a continuous affirmation throughout history of the dignity of every human being, created in the image of God, even if it took eighteen centuries for its full incompatibility with slavery to be explicitly recognized. This constitutes a wound in Christian memory, one from which we cannot consider ourselves detached. It is impossible not to feel deep sorrow when contemplating the immense suffering and humiliation endured by so many in stark contrast to their immeasurable dignity as persons infinitely loved by the Lord. **For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon**” (*MH*, no. 176).

This moment of humility is deeply significant. It reflects not only an institutional awareness, but a pastoral act of contrition that invites healing. It reminds us that truth-telling, even when painful, is a necessary step on the path toward reconciliation.

The [Holy See's](#) clear condemnation of slavery and its call to uphold historical truth marks an important step in aligning moral teaching with public witness. Such moments offer an opportunity for the Church to accompany the world in processes of remembrance, healing, and reconciliation.

The Holy Father's apology invites us into a deeper spiritual posture, one that Pope Francis described as essential to Christian life: the willingness to acknowledge sin so that our hearts may be opened to God's grace. As Pope Francis [affirmed](#), recognizing our sin allows "our hearts [to] be opened to the working of the Holy Spirit" (*DN*, no. 159). It enables the entire Body of Christ to move toward authentic healing and reconciliation.

Our Catholic tradition reminds us of the healing that comes from acknowledging our sins. Pope Francis stated, acknowledging our sins requires honesty about a past "marred by sin" and reflects the humility of a contrite heart (*DN*, no. 188). This is a truth we encounter most profoundly in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. There, we bring our brokenness before the Lord, trusting in His mercy and committing ourselves to conversion. In a similar way, the Church's acknowledgment of its past failures in the area of racial injustice can become a source of grace, inviting renewal and transformation.

The work of racial justice remains both urgent and ongoing. It calls us not only to remember the past, but also to actively build a more just and peaceful future. The Holy Father reminds us; true peace cannot exist apart from justice:

"All of us, at every level, can contribute to building the foundation of peace, which is justice. We do not merely seek any kind of peace — such as an absence of conflict at any cost — but instead, the true peace born of justice. "There exists a very close connection between the justice of the individual and the peace of everyone." Commenting on the psalm verse "justice and peace have embraced" (Ps 84:11), Saint Augustine wrote: "There is no one who shuns the desire for peace, yet not everyone is willing to practice justice... But perform the works of justice, keeping in mind that justice and peace have embraced; they are not at odds with one another. Why do you set yourself against justice? Here, for example, is justice telling you not to steal, but you pay no heed; not to commit adultery, and you turn a deaf ear; not to do to others what you would not want done to yourself; not to say about your neighbor the things you would not want said about yourself... Do you therefore wish to attain peace? Then practice justice!" (*MH*, no. 215).

This teaching challenges us to move beyond complacency. It calls us to examine our own lives, our institutions, and our communities, asking whether they reflect the justice that leads to peace. It urges us to stand in solidarity with those who continue to experience the effects of racial

injustice, and to work tirelessly for systems and structures that uphold the dignity of every person.

May we, as the People of God, respond to this call with courage and humility. May we strive each day to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with our God. In doing so, may we help to "rebuild the walls of fraternal coexistence" and a communion of love where all God's children can flourish (*MH*, no. 9).