

Juneteenth: A Pastoral Reflection on Racial Justice

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” - Luke 4:18

As we approach the observance of Juneteenth, We find ourselves reflecting on its history, its enduring significance, and why this observance speaks to my heart as Shepherds of the Church. As we commemorate Juneteenth, what we are celebrating is an opportunity to remember and to recommit ourselves to the ongoing work of racial justice. As Catholics, we can share the light of our commitment to all human dignity.

To fully appreciate the importance of Juneteenth, one must first understand what we commemorate and why it continues to hold such deep meaning.

On June 19, 1865, more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Major General Gordon Granger and Union troops arrived in Galveston, Texas, to announce the end of slavery and the Civil War. Despite the Emancipation Proclamation, many enslavers in the South continued to unlawfully enslave African Americans. The events of that day marked a significant turning point. Over time, Juneteenth has come to represent liberation and the ongoing struggle for justice and civil rights in our nation. On June 17, 2021, Juneteenth was officially recognized as a [federal holiday](#), though it had long been commemorated—especially in Texas—by those who understood its significance.

Juneteenth invites us to confront the painful history and legacy of racism in our country. The institution of slavery, often referred to as America’s “original sin,” continues to cast a long shadow. The consequences of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans are still evident today, particularly through the persistent sin of racism in our systems, communities, and hearts. (*Open Wide Our Hearts*, pg. 5) This sin has inflicted deep wounds on the dignity of the human person and has obscured the fundamental truth that every individual is created in the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*). Juneteenth offers us an opportunity to remember this history and acknowledge the ways in which its effects continue to shape our present reality.

At the same time, Juneteenth calls us forward. It challenges us—as individuals, as a society, and as the Church—to renew our commitment to racial justice, reconciliation, and peace. In his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV reminds us that true peace is inseparable 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. Do you therefore wish to attain peace? Then practice justice! Let us never grow weary of seeking justice!” (no. 215)

This teaching underscores the moral responsibility we share in confronting injustice in all its forms, including racial injustice. Each of us has a role to play in promoting the work of racial justice and healing. I encourage my Catholic brothers and sisters to read the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter against racism, *[Open Wide Our Hearts](#)*. This important pastoral letter highlights foundations for understanding both the historical and moral dimensions of racism in our society, and why we, as Catholics, are called to work together in pursuit of true justice for all people.

May we continue to be inspired by the witness of the "[Saintly Seven](#)" and all those who have labored for racial justice, especially in the Church. And may we, grounded in our faith and guided by the Gospel, continue striving toward a society that more fully reflects the dignity of every human person.