



# open wide our hearts

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently approved a new pastoral letter - Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>) – examining the “persistent” history of racism in this nation. Fr. Simon Kim, Director of Intercultural Initiatives at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, served on the original drafting committee and offers the following summary:

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 (3).

The 2018 Pastoral Letter against Racism, Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love, by the USCCB addresses a growing concern in our country based on a continuous history of discrimination and violence along with extreme nationalist ideologies (4). With

a posture of humility, the words of the prophet Micah are highlighted in the letter as a way of acknowledging that history of racism as a call to overcome the sins of omission when it comes to combating racism and in working for racial reconciliation:

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)

“The persistence of the evil of racism is why we are writing this letter now. People are still being harmed, so action is needed (7)” say the Bishops. It is also fitting, they note, that this statement was released on the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as the Bishops point to Dr. King’s leadership which includes both ecumenical and interreligious collaboration as the way to address the roots of racism that is embedded in this country’s policies and institutions (28-29).

“The evil of racism,” we are told, “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” (10). Racism is defined in the statement, as a conscious or unconscious belief in racial superiority, acts that violate justice, and an ignorance of the fundamental truth that we are all created equally in God’s image (3-4).

Racism, then, not only resides within our hearts, but also in social structures of our culture and institutions (5). Therefore, justice is required where we must put our world into right relationships with God, one another, and creation (9). In order to do this, the bishops call for an acknowledgement of the history of violence done to our brothers and sisters for “[t]oo many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life” (10).

In particular, the bishops draw our attention first to the Native American experience where indigenous peoples were forcibly removed from their land; thereby, also stripping them of their dignity in the process:

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 (11).

Next, the African American experience highlights the “original sin” of our country as chattel slavery was much more brutal than any other forms of enslavement (13). We are still haunted by the depth of this degradation:

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 (14).

Lastly, the Hispanic experience highlights again that racist attitudes of the past continue in their current reality as:

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 . . . We must also remember that many people of Hispanic heritage come from families that were in this land long before the borders changed (16).

Racism of the past continues to rear its ugly head in the present conditions, plaguing our Church and society. Thus, the Bishops encourage educating ourselves through the encounters of the past as well as the present. In listening to the stories of those around us, we come to better understand how the sins of the past still play out in the lives of people today (25):

[W]e 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 (16-17).

To rebuild the relationships broken by centuries of oppressive acts of racism requires us to “love goodness” and to “walk humbly with God.” The urgent response to racism is to love courageously as illustrated in the life of Fr. Augustus Tolton (https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201402/augustus-tolton-pioneer-pastor-28450), Servant of God (19). His life – a runaway slave, ordained to the priesthood and now being considered for canonization – testifies to the love that resists racism as he faced discrimination in the seminary and even after his ordination to the priesthood.

The bishops have accepted their role “to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly” by creating an Ad Hoc committee on racism where they will continue to listen through national dialogues, advise with working models, and explore racial reconciliation initiatives (24). However, these efforts fall short if individuals, parishes, and communities (21) do not also respond to racial inequalities in a similar manner since racism is unequivocally a life issue (30) requiring the conversion of all (29).

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 (27).

Read the pastoral letter, Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>).

PRINTER FRIENDLY VERSION

## HIGHLIGHTS



(<https://cacatholic.org/article/governor-focuses-schools-during-state-update>)

**August 14, 2020**



(<https://cacatholic.org/article/bishops-join-legal-action-prevent-states-taking-cares-act-funding-non-public-school>)

**August 3, 2020**