

# RACISM

It's been more than four centuries since the first Africans came to our land as slaves. In late May, we'll mark the centennial of the country's worst racial massacre, in Tulsa, as well as the first anniversary of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis. These are just some examples of an evil that has haunted our communities for generations: racism.

The American bishops issued a pastoral letter against racism, calling it a *“destructive and persistent form of evil. Despite many promising strides made in our country, racism still infects our nation. ... The cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that makes us all accomplices in racism.”*

Racism arises when a person considers his own race or ethnicity superior to others, judging them inferior or unworthy of equal regard. It isn't just a “character flaw” – the bishops plainly stated: *“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.”*

Racism violates justice. It ignores our equality as God's children. *“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.”*

The bishops pointed to various signs of racism in our society – nooses and swastikas; discrimination against minorities in hiring, housing, schooling, and incarceration; racial profiling that targets Hispanics for selective immigration enforcement, and African Americans for suspected criminal activity; a growing fear and harassment of Muslims; and xenophobic rhetoric instigating fear against foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. There are also sins of omission, *“when individuals, communities, and even churches remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when it is encountered.”*

They noted *“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. ... For many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger. ... 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. We could go on, for the instances of discrimination, prejudice, and racism, sadly, are too many.”*

While these may sound like very recent observations, the bishops actually issued their pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, 2½ years ago, in November 2018.

It was not the first time the U.S. bishops expressed their concern about racism. In the late 1950s, '60s, and '70s – history for some of you, current events for many of us – they condemned segregation, “Jim Crow” laws, policies that fomented violent eruptions, and ongoing economic imbalances. The 2018 letter stated that, despite progress from civil rights legislation, *“racism still profoundly affects our culture, and has no place in the Christian heart. ... 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.”*

The bishops looked to the prophet Micah for the steps leading to such a conversion: *“to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Mi 6:8)”*

To do justice, we must recognize and respect the God-given rights of others, honestly admitting our failures and restoring our proper relationships. Many groups in our country have been the targets of racial and ethnic prejudice – Irish, Italians, Poles, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Japanese, Jews and Muslims. Especially instructive are the experiences of Native, African, and Hispanic Americans. The destructive notion of white superiority brought oppression and cultural attacks that still linger for these peoples. While some Church leaders and groups ministered to them in an expression of Christian love, others were too often complicit in the unjust, racist activity.

To love goodness, we must first be honest with ourselves about our inner attitudes. *“When we start to see some people as ‘them’ and others as ‘us,’ we fail to love. ... The command of love requires us to make room for others in our hearts.”* When we commit to Christian love, we will reach out to victims of oppression, help others to convert from racist ideas, and begin to change the policies and structures that allow racism to persist.

To walk humbly with our God means pressing forward without fear *“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.’ (What We Have Seen and Heard, A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States, 1984)”*

Acknowledging that the Church has been complicit in the evil of racism, the bishops expressed deep sorrow and regret and asked forgiveness from all who have been harmed. They noted the need to encounter and build relationships with others, especially those outside our normal circles, *“opening our minds and hearts to value and respect the experiences of those who have been harmed by the evil of racism.”* They called on all Christians *“to join others in advocating and promoting policies at all levels that will combat racism and its effects in our civic and social institutions.”*