

RACIAL HARMONY

A Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Louisiana

The teaching of the Roman Catholic Church on racism is clear.¹ Racism is morally wrong. To persist obstinately in this stance is unchristian.

Racism is the theory or practice which assumes that one race or ethnic stock is superior to another. It denies the equal dignity of all the members of the human family.

Sacred Scripture testifies that God created us with an equal dignity and destiny (Genesis 1:26). After sin introduced division and oppression, the Lord Jesus restored at least in principle equality and respect for neighbor and foreigner, man and woman. He restored the unity of all in one people and one body. He taught us to recognize His face in every brother and sister. St. Paul in reflecting on this wrote that in Christ Jesus there is no male or female, no Greek or Roman, no slave or free person (Galatians 3:28). We share a common dignity in Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit we enjoy communion with the triune God and are bonded with one another as brothers and sisters. We are now called to realize in practice God's original created plan, restored in Christ Jesus.

Racism continues to exist in our time despite Christian teaching. We should remember, however, that racism as an ideology is a rather late phenomenon in history. Only at the end of the eighteenth century was the word "race" used for the first time to classify human beings biologically.

The theories about essential differences of a hereditary biological nature led to fostering at that time and subsequently a racist ideology which in turn served as a convenient tool to justify the practice already in use by slave traders and profiteers. The oppression of others can flourish only when the basic truths of God's creative action are forgotten. This was dramatically demonstrated again in the 1930s and 1940s when a genetic concept of race became popular.

Contemporary scientific research on the degree of genetic variations in people indicates that almost all genetic diversity is accounted for by variation within populations, rather than by differences between populations. Individual variations in human DNA profiles overwhelm any interpopulation differences, no matter how the populations are ethnically or racially classified. Therefore, the superiority or inferiority of races cannot be substantiated by genetics.

In 1984 the Catholic Bishops of Louisiana insisted: "There is no ethnic hierarchy among the children of God; ethnic gifts deserve the same reverence and respect that we hold for life itself." We also lamented that racism still affected our country, our state and even our church. Twice since then, in 1989 and 1990, the Church in Louisiana has condemned all forms or expressions of racism.

Let us then make it clear again. To hold that one race is inherently superior to another is a serious sin. To persist obstinately in this stance is incompatible with God's original creation and our redemption in Christ Jesus.

In a sense it is easy and natural to observe certain physical differences which exist among people. Are we wrong to notice such differences? We answer: In our lives together as members of different ethnic and family backgrounds it is natural for us to notice differences which may exist among us. We are helped in our own personal growth and development when we can appreciate and learn from such differences. It is only when we presume to boast of having superiority over others, or judge unfairly, or discriminate against their basic rights as human persons that we offend. Moreover, the absence of personal fault for the level of racism does not absolve us of all responsibility. Social harm demands a social remedy.

It is our conviction that the people of Louisiana truly want to promote racial harmony. Citizens, black and white, live side by side in a number of neighborhoods, attend community schools, and work together in constructive ways. In the Catholic Church, some African-Americans prefer to remain in historically Black parishes, others are welcomed into territorial parishes. There is a helpful twinning of some Black parishes with territorial parishes. Vietnamese, Hispanic, and other immigrant peoples are being welcomed as well.

We also know, however, that recent political campaigns have been tinged with slightly veiled racial rhetoric. The media coverage of events can sometimes give undue attention to more extreme racial positions. Some unsolved crimes involving the burning of African-American churches arouse anxieties about the possibility of racial motivation. Prejudices against immigrants can also degenerate into xenophobia or even racial hatred. There are also many subtle ways in which racial attitudes and prejudices can influence feelings, judgments and actions in us all.

Sacred Scripture offers us a graced corrective. If we place ourselves humbly and sincerely before the revelation which God gives to us in Sacred Scripture and pray for the gift of His Holy Spirit to help us to understand, we will be strengthened in the understanding of God's way and given the grace to live it. Hence we recommend for this purpose reflections on the Sacred Scriptures.²

It is our hope that the pondering of God's word will then lead to an inner conversion of heart and some constructive initiatives.

Conclusion

The good news of the victory of Jesus Christ over sin and death encourages us to proclaim anew this call to conversion and His invitation to new life. We cannot tolerate racism. We cannot allow fears and hatreds to drive us apart.

We repent and ask for forgiveness for any failures in the past or present and the grace to recognize the seriousness of this injustice and to resist it more strongly and forthrightly. We pledge with God's grace to be more faithful to the deeper and fuller implications of the gospel message entrusted to us. We seek to promote the reconciliation that God offers to us in Christ Jesus. We want to work with all people of good will. We seek collaboration with the faithful of other religions.

We thank God who has made us all in His image and likeness, called us to call Him our Father and to live as brothers and sisters in one family. We rejoice in the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ, who has given us the grace to know repentance and the forgiveness of our sins and the grace to live new

life in Him. May the faith and love of Mary the Mother of Jesus and the Mother of the Church inspire and help us through the Holy Spirit to live truly as brothers and sisters of her Son, Jesus Christ.

¹Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, "The Church and Racism," 1988; National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," 1979; Black Catholic Bishops, "What We Have Seen and Heard," 1984; N.C.C.B., "For the Love of One Another," 1991; and a series of statements on racism by Louisiana's Bishops in 1984, 1989 and 1990.

²For example:

Matthew 22:1-14 (Guests at a banquet)

Mark 12:28-31 (Great Commandment)

John 15:12 (Love one another)

Acts 10:1-48 (Story of Cornelius)

Romans 13:10 (Love fulfills law)

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (Mystical Body)

Galatians 3:26-28 (...no Jew or Greek...)

Ephesians 4:1-15 (Support Body of Christ in love)

Ephesians 4:31-32 (Get rid of anger)

1 John 2:7-11 (One who hates his brother is in darkness)

1 John 4:20-21 (Whoever loves God must love his brother)



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