



open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

This is the second in a series of articles focused on helping share the important messages contained in this pastoral letter issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Do Justice

For a nation to be just, it must be a society that recognizes and respects the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. These rights precede any society because they flow from the dignity granted to each person as created by God.

From revelation, we know that the one God who created the human race is Triune, a communion of truth and love, and so by faith we recognize all the more clearly that human beings are, by their very nature, made for communion. Pope Benedict XVI noted, “As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God.” We are meant to love God with our whole being, which then overflows into love for our neighbor. “Whoever loves God must love his brother” (1 Jn 4:21).

This is the original meaning of justice, where we are in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of God's creation. Justice was a gift of grace given to all of humanity. After sin entered the world, however, this sense of justice was overtaken by selfish desires, and we became inclined to sin. St. Augustine described well our lives after Eden, saying that in the fallen world our relationships with one another have been guided by a “lust to dominate.” Whether recognized or not, the history of the injustices done to so many, because of their race, flows from this “lust to dominate” the other.

Although our nation has moved forward in a number of ways against racial discrimination, we have lost ground in others. Despite significant progress in civil law with regard to racism, societal realities indicate a need for further catechesis to facilitate conversion of hearts. Too many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life. The evil of racism 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. Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people.

As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice.

Excerpt from “Open Wide Our Hearts: the enduring call to love”

A pastoral letter against racism from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops