



open wide our hearts

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

This is the third 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.

The Native American Experience

Before Europeans arrived, this land already had many diverse peoples upon it, with varying customs, languages, and beliefs. As explorers, and then pioneers, arrived, relations with Native Americans also varied but were mostly to the detriment of Native peoples. Native Americans experienced deep wounds in the age of colonization and expansion, wounds that largely remain unhealed and strongly impact the generations to this day—a fact that St. John Paul II recognized when he met with Native peoples in 1987: “The early encounter between your traditional cultures and the European way of life was an event of such significance and change that it profoundly influences your collective life even today. That encounter was a harsh and painful reality for your peoples. The cultural oppression, the injustices, the disruption of your life and of your traditional societies must be acknowledged.”

Many European settlers were blind to the dignity of indigenous peoples. 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. The results were massive, forced relocations of people, such as the forced removal of the Cherokee people from the Southeast to the Western territories along the “Trail of Tears,” and of the Navajo in the “Long Walk.”

During this time there were missions that stood as a barrier to the abuse of indigenous peoples and provided a form of protection in a rapidly changing reality. Although not all encounters with missionaries were benign, a number of missionaries heroically defended Native Americans as they sought to bring the Good News of Christ to many who had yet to hear it.

Yet, in the order of natural justice, these acts done in the power of Christ’s Spirit are overshadowed by the devastation caused by policies of expansion and manifest destiny, fueled by racist attitudes, that led to the near eradication of Native American peoples and their cultures. The effects of this evil remain visible in the great difficulties experienced by Native American communities today. Poverty, unemployment, inadequate health care, poor schools, the exploitation of natural resources, and disputes over land ownership are all factors that cannot, and should not, be ignored.

The truth that we must face is straightforward. When one culture meets another, lack of awareness and understanding often leads to grossly distorted value judgments and prejudice. This prejudice fuels attitudes of superiority that are embedded in, and reinforced by, social structures and laws. This is evident in how white European immigrants and pioneers acted in their encounters with Native Americans; it is equally evident in the treatment of Africans who were enslaved and brought to the shores of America.

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

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