



# open wide our hearts

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

*This is the fourth 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 African American Experience***

As this country was forming, Africans were bought and sold as mere property, often beaten, raped, and literally worked to death. This form of slavery, known as chattel slavery, was different from and far more brutal than the slavery known in ancient times. Racial categories, which classified different ethnic communities as different races, some even as subhuman, were used to justify this new form of slavery. The injustices of chattel slavery were horrifying and lasted for generations. Families were separated, marriages were forbidden or dishonored, and children were maltreated and forced to work. After slavery ended, many former slaves faced continued servitude in the evolving economies that once relied upon their labor, and blacks encountered new forms of resentment and violence. In freedom, millions of blacks lived in constant fear for their lives. Most resided in extreme poverty and endured daily indignities in their interactions with whites. Efforts to advance out of poverty by working a small farm, owning a business, building a school, or forming a trade union generally met fierce resistance throughout the country. For so many, the right to participate in the political process would be withheld or severely hindered for another century.

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. This reality represents more than a few isolated stories; it was the lived experience of the vast majority of African Americans for most of our national history.

Still, to understand how racism works today, we must recognize that generations of African Americans were disadvantaged by slavery, wage theft, “Jim Crow” laws, and by the systematic denial of access to numerous wealth-building opportunities reserved for others. The poverty experienced by many of these communities has its roots in racist policies that continue to impede the ability of people to find affordable housing, meaningful work, adequate education, and social mobility. The generational effects of slavery, segregation, and the systemic use of violence are realities that must be fully recognized and addressed in any process that hopes to combat racism.

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

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