



open wide our hearts

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

This is the seventh 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.

Walk Humbly with God: Acknowledging Sin

To press forward without fear means “to walk humbly with God” 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.” Racism is a moral problem that requires a moral remedy—a transformation of the human heart—that impels us to act. The power of this type of transformation will be a strong catalyst in eliminating those injustices that impinge on human dignity. As Christians, we know this to be true, for with “God all things are possible” (Mt 19:26). It is the Lord who, by his grace, forgives and restores us to these relationships and heals the wounds between us. After all, the aim of salvation history is reconciliation and entering the heavenly Jerusalem, a communion of all peoples and all nations.

To press forward without fear also means cooperating with God’s grace by taking direct and deliberate steps for change. It means opening doorways where once only walls stood.

Examining our sinfulness—individually, as the Christian community, and as a society—is a humbling experience. Only from a place of humility can we look honestly at past failures, ask for forgiveness, and move toward healing and reconciliation. This requires us to acknowledge sinful deeds and thoughts, and to ask for forgiveness. The truth is that the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church have been complicit in the evil of racism. In his Papal Bull *Dum Diversas* (1452), Nicholas V granted apostolic permission for the kings of Spain and Portugal to buy and sell Africans, setting the stage for the slave trade. Even though subsequent popes strongly renounced and rejected the international slave trade, much to our shame, many American religious leaders, including Catholic bishops, failed to formally oppose slavery; some even owned slaves.

We also realize the ways that racism has permeated the life of the Church and persists to a degree even today. “For too long,” in the Church’s missions throughout the world, “the way to a fully indigenous clergy and religious was blocked by an attitude that was paternalistic and racist.” Not long ago, in many Catholic parishes, people of color were relegated to segregated seating, and required to receive the Holy Eucharist after white parishioners. All too often, leaders of the Church have remained silent about the horrific violence and other racial injustices perpetuated against African Americans and others.

Therefore we, the Catholic bishops in the United States, acknowledge the many times when the Church has failed to live as Christ taught. Acts of racism have been committed by leaders and members of the Catholic Church—by bishops, clergy, religious, and laity—and her institutions. We express deep sorrow and regret for them. We also acknowledge those instances when we have not done enough or stood by silently when grave acts of injustice were committed. We ask for forgiveness from all who have been harmed by these sins committed in the past or in the present.

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

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