



Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development

Office of Domestic Social Development

Racism: Confronting the Poison in Our Common Home January 2016

The centrality of the human person and the natural inclination of persons and peoples to establish relationships among themselves are the fundamental elements for building a true international community, the ordering of which must aim at guaranteeing the effective universal common good. . . . any theory or form whatsoever of racism and racial discrimination is morally unacceptable.

-Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, No. 433

ISSUE

“Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church. Despite apparent advances and even significant changes in the last two decades, the reality of racism remains. In large part it is only external appearances which have changed.” So begins *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, the Catholic Bishops of the United States, pastoral statement on racism, written in 1979. Almost forty years later, communities within the United States continue to struggle with conversations and challenges that have racial components. Recent events in communities across the country, academic research and reports, and the caustic rhetoric that marks conversations about refugees and migrants, all provide ample evidence that there is still much work to do. As Christians, we are called to constantly examine our own hearts and consciences for how we might contribute to or break down racial divisions, intolerance, and discrimination.

The increasing need for healing, that comes from an fuller understanding and acknowledgement of the lived reality of people and communities of color, cannot be understated. Lost lives need to be mourned; traumatized families and broken communities need to be healed. And this is an issue that concerns everyone, because the lives and dignity of children, as well as the health of communities, depend on it. The [Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace](#) has written, “...racism still exists and continually reappears in different forms. It is a wound in humanity's side that mysteriously remains open. Everyone, therefore, must make efforts to heal it with great firmness and patience.”

Discrimination in Social and Economic Life

Discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity takes many forms. Thankfully, the United States has eliminated the institutional, legalized racial discrimination of years past: slavery, Jim Crow laws, ‘separate but equal’ schools, and prohibitions on voting or owning land, to name just a few examples, are gone. These victories were hard fought, and deserve to be remembered and celebrated.

These advances, while substantial, are still incomplete. Unfortunately, America remains a deeply divided place in many ways. Too many Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, live in technically unsegregated yet homogenous communities due to persistent challenges on many levels--education, employment, housing, just to name a few. As a result, dialogue and encounter with others with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and opinions, can be limited.

Indicators of social welfare and economic security demonstrate that many persons of color seriously lag their white counterparts in too many ways. Unemployment rates for Africans Americans and Latinos are considera-

bly higher than the national average, while [research shows that minority job applicants face discrimination](#) in hiring practices. Minority homeownership rates lag those of whites, while news reports [document racial bias](#) in mortgage lending practices. Despite the reality that different racial and ethnic groups commit crimes and use illegal drugs at roughly the same rates, [African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately affected](#) through every stage of the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, these examples of disparate impact are present throughout the country's social and economic life. In respect to children, disparities that appear earlier in life become more difficult to remedy--and the effects become more harmful--later in life.

USCCB POSITION

In *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, the U.S. Catholic Bishops said "Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society." The Catholic bishops of the United States continue this work so that all members of the human family are treated with dignity and love. Recent statements have decried race-based violence and discrimination, while appealing to dialogue, encounter, and prayer. Last year, Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, of Louisville, Kentucky, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), said:

We mourn those tragic events in which African Americans and others have lost their lives in altercations with law enforcement officials.... In every instance, our prayer for every community is that of our Lord in Saint John's Gospel, "that they all may be one." ... We join our voices with civic and religious leaders in pledging to work for healing and reconciliation. Our efforts must address root causes of these conflicts. A violent, sorrowful history of racial injustice, accompanied by a lack of educational, employment and housing opportunities, has destroyed communities and broken down families, especially those who live in distressed urban communities.

The USCCB is also a member of Christian Churches Together (CCT), an ecumenical organization dedicated to enhancing Christian witness throughout the country in response to racism, discrimination, and intolerance. On the 50th Anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, [CCT responded](#) that "the call is the same as in 1963--for followers of Christ to stand together, work together, and to struggle together for justice. . . . We resolve courageously to face the injustice that is within ourselves, our institutions, and our nation. The church must lead rather than follow in the march toward justice."

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the domestic antipoverty program of the USCCB, funds many organizations that have been leaders in building coalitions that help avoid conflicts, as well as responding peacefully and prayerfully to events in their communities that do take place. For example, the No Boundaries Coalition is building relationships between neighborhoods and public officials in West Baltimore to improve safety and eliminate food deserts. Find out what CCHD-funded groups are doing in your community by using the interactive map at: povertyusa.org/the-state-of-poverty/poverty-map-county/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#) Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Statement on Racism

[Statement of Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, of Louisville, Kentucky](#), president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), to the Spring General Assembly, June 10, 2015

[USCCB Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church](#)

[Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good](#) Catholic Charities USA

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Andrea Browne-Phillips, Director of Inclusion and Engagement, Catholic Charities USA: (703) 549-1390

Ralph McCloud, Executive Director, Catholic Campaign for Human Development: (202) 541-3210

USCCB Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church: (202) 541-3350; diversity@usccb.org