

THE CHALLENGE OF RACISM TODAY

His Eminence

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*To the Clergy, Religious and Laity
of the Church of Washington*

Grace and peace to all in Christ.

The sight from the sanctuary of many a church in our archdiocese offers a glimpse of the face of the world. On almost any Sunday, we can join neighbors and newcomers from varied backgrounds. We take great pride in the coming together for Mass of women and men, young and old, from so many lands, ethnic heritages and cultural traditions. Often we can point to this unity as a sign of the power of grace to bring people together.

But we also know that we still have a long way to go to realize the harmony to which we are called as a human family. One wound to that unity is the persistent evil of racism. Tragically, the divisive force of this sin continues to be felt across our land and in our society. It is our faith that calls us to see each other as members of God's family. It is our faith that calls us to confront and overcome racism.

This challenge is rooted in our Christian identity as sisters and brothers, redeemed by the blood of Christ. Because God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, we have received the ministry of reconciliation. Saint Paul tells us, "God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ... entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

The mission of reconciliation takes on fresh emphasis today as racism continues to manifest itself in our country, requiring us to strengthen our efforts. We are all aware of incidents both national and closer to home that call attention to the continuing racial tensions in our society. In spite of numerous positive advances and the goodwill of many, many people, too many of our brothers and sisters continue to experience racism. So much is this true that our United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has established an Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism made up of clergy, laywomen and laymen to speak out on this divisive evil that leaves great harm in its wake.

This is not the first time that we bishops have spoken out against racism. We raised our collective voice in the pastoral reflection, *Brothers and Sisters to Us* (1979). Here in our own archdiocese, we have the edifying example of Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle and his actions to desegregate our Catholic schools years before the Supreme Court moved on this issue. We have also his letter to all of the Catholic faithful reminding them that his actions and his teaching were rooted in the Gospel and "the teachings of the Church on what Catholics must believe and do." It is in continuity with that same teaching, shared and expressed by every Archbishop of Washington, that I ask us to reflect on and emphasize anew the importance of dialogue on how we can confront racism today.

To address racism, we need to recognize two things: that it exists in a variety of forms, some more subtle and others more obvious; and that there is something we can do about it even if we realize that what we say and the steps we take will not result in an immediate solution to a problem that spans generations. We must, however, confront this issue with the conviction that in some personal ways we can help to resolve it.

Where do we start? Before we turn our attention to some forms of action, we need to reaffirm that what we are doing is not only good but necessary because it is willed by God.

The divisions we face today that are based on the color of one's skin or ethnic background are obviously not a part of God's plan. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis we read at the beginning of the story of humanity, "God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1.27).

This teaching is applied to our day with clarity in The Catechism of the Catholic Church. "Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone... called by grace to a covenant with his Creator, to offer him a response of faith and love that no other creature can give in his stead" (357).

This is the starting point for our reflection. The human race is rooted in the loving, creative act of God, who made us and called us to be a family – all God's children – made in God's image and likeness. There is no basis to sustain that some are made more in the image of God than others.

In whatever form, intolerance of other people because of their race, religion or national origin is ultimately a denial of human dignity. No one is better than another person because of the color of their skin or the place of their birth. What makes us equal before God and what should make us equal in dignity before each other is that we are all sisters and brothers of one another, because we are all children of the same loving God who brought us into being.

Racism denies the basic equality and dignity of all people before God and one another. It is for this reason that the United States bishops in the November 1979 pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, clearly state: "Racism is a sin." It is a sin because "it divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father." The letter goes on to remind us that "Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race."

Racism is defined as a sin because it offends God by a denial of the goodness of creation. It is a sin against our neighbor, particularly when it is manifested in support of systemic social, economic and political structures of sin. It is also a sin against the unity of the Body of Christ by undermining that solidarity by personal sins of prejudice, discrimination and violence.

Tragically, the stain of racism has revealed itself through the course of human history, touching seemingly every continent as migration and trade, exploration and colonial expansion created environments for prejudice, denigration, marginalization, discrimination and oppression, whether to indigenous peoples or newcomers.

Our own country's history has seen exploitation and oppression of indigenous peoples, Asians, Latinos, Japanese-Americans and others, including people from various parts of Europe. But in our homeland, the most profound and extensive evidence of racism lies in the sin of centuries of

human trafficking, enslavement, segregation and the lingering effects experienced by African-American men, women and children.

We are called to recognize today that racism continues to manifest itself in many ways. It can be personal, institutional, or social. Often racism is both learned from others and born of ignorance from not interacting with people who are from a different culture and ethnic heritage. This historic experience has been aggravated by the selective outrage at some forms of discrimination and the silent support of other expressions of discrimination by some political forces, some faith-based and church entities, and some media. What should be a blessing – the diversity of our backgrounds, experiences and cultures – is turned into a hindrance to unity and a heavy burden for some to bear. The pain it causes in people's lives is very real.

As we struggle to remove the attitudes that nurture racism and the actions that express it, we must show how the differences we find in skin color, national origin or cultural diversity are enriching. Differences mean diversity, not being better or worse. Equality among all men and women does not mean that they must all look, talk, think alike and act in an identical manner. Equality does not mean uniformity. Rather each person should be seen in his or her uniqueness as a reflection of the glory of God and a full, complete member of the human family.

Among Christians the call to unity is greater because it is rooted in grace and, therefore, racism merits even stronger condemnation. Everyone who is baptized into Christ Jesus is called to new life in the Lord. Baptism unites us with the Risen Lord and through him with every person who sacramentally has died and risen to new life in Christ. This unity, sacramental and real, brings us together on a level above and beyond the purely physical. It carries that oneness we all share through the natural reality of creation to a higher level -- the realm of grace.

In Christ we live in the same Spirit, we share the same new life and are members of one spiritual body. As members of the Church we are called to be witnesses to the unity of God's family and, therefore, to be a living testimony to the inclusiveness that is a graced sign of our oneness.

The call to a unity that transcends ethnic ties and racial differences is a hard one for some people to accept. We can become comfortable in the enclave of our own familiar world and even view others who are different from us, ethnically or because of the color of their skin, with suspicion. Nonetheless, to be truly faithful to Christ we must respond to his teaching that we are one in him and, therefore, one with each other. "Through Christ we are one family" (Lumen Gentium 51).

Intolerance and racism will not go away without a concerted awareness and effort on everyone's part. Regularly we must renew the commitment to drive it out of our hearts, our lives and our community. While we may devise all types of politically correct statements to proclaim racial equality, without a change in the basic attitude of the human heart we will never move to that level of oneness that accepts each other for who we are and the likeness we share as images of God.

Saint John Paul II in the Great Jubilee Year asked for the recognition of sins committed by members of the Church during its history. He called for reconciliation through recalling the faults of the past in a spirit of prayerful repentance that leads to healing of the wounds of sin.

Today we need to acknowledge past sins of racism and, in a spirit of reconciliation, move towards a Church and society where the wounds of racism are healed. In this process, we need to go forward in the light of faith, embracing all of those around us, realizing that those wounded by the sin of racism should never be forgotten.

At the same time, we acknowledge the witness of African-American Catholics who through eras of enslavement, segregation and societal racism have remained steadfastly faithful. We also recognize the enduring faith of immigrants who have not always felt welcome in the communities they now call home.

As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to work together for a present and future rooted in the commitment that Pope Francis described in his October 2013 address to the delegation of the Simon Wiesenthal Center: “Let us combine our efforts in promoting a culture of encounter, respect, understanding and mutual forgiveness.”

Responding to Christ’s love calls us to action. We need to move to the level of Christian solidarity. The term, often spoken of by a succession of popes as a virtue, touches the practical implications of what it means to recognize our unity with others. There is a sense in which solidarity is our commitment to oneness at work in the practical order.

Within the archdiocese, we have sought to make our commitment to oneness concrete, and the fight against racism a priority. Recognizing that we are a Church that is universal and composed of people from all lands, races, ethnicities, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds, each of our parishes and schools in this archdiocese accepts the challenge to provide a welcoming and inclusive home for all. We must all seek to affirm and rejoice in the gift of our diversity. Such a task is underscored in our archdiocesan-wide trainings in intercultural competency for parishes, schools, programs for our seminarians, and newly ordained priests to be better able to serve culturally and ethnically diverse communities.

In a particular way, the Office of Cultural Diversity and Outreach provides resources and serves a significant role in our efforts to draw together all of the faithful of this Church in order that we might rejoice in the ethnic and cultural heritage of each of our sisters and brothers. To name just a few, these initiatives involve our celebration of Black Catholic History Month including a Mass featuring the Archdiocese of Washington’s Gospel Choir, and in January at the annual Mass honoring the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., we gather as an archdiocesan family to prayerfully celebrate Dr. King’s march for freedom and to resolve to continue that march together.

Our Walk with Mary annually commemorates Our Lady of Guadalupe and we invite local Catholics from all backgrounds to walk and pray together at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in recognition of Mary’s role as our spiritual mother and as patroness of the Americas. Our Church of Washington also joins the Church in the United States in celebrating National Migration Week and encourages Catholics at our local parishes to reflect on the challenges faced by immigrants, refugees and victims of human trafficking.

Our efforts also extend beyond our parishes. Through our Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington and the Spanish Catholic Center, we extend a helping and welcoming hand to all who need it, particularly those newcomers regardless of race or creed. Housing and family assistance, medical and dental care, legal services and job training are all available to men, women, and children from all communities across the archdiocese.

In the area of education, our archdiocesan schools strive to provide students from African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native Indian American families with an accessible, affordable education that is academically excellent and marked by a strong Catholic identity centered on the life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ. Catholic schools in this archdiocese continue to be

places where students learn to grow in the Gospel virtues of respect for the dignity of the “other,” justice, solidarity and unity.

The archdiocese also expands educational opportunities and a brighter future for all children through archdiocesan and parish tuition assistance so students from more families across our community can benefit from the gift of a Catholic education. We also recognize the importance of promoting federal efforts, such as the Opportunity Scholarship Program for the District of Columbia, and Maryland’s state effort, the BOOST scholarship program.

Through these and many other programs in this archdiocese, I invite all of us to a more profound awareness of our obligations to embrace one another truly as sisters and brothers in Christ, in one human family created by a loving God.

Our parishes can take positive steps to promote unity and understanding among all members of our family of faith. The Sunday Eucharist offers a wealth of opportunities to reflect on this issue. The prayers of the faithful can promote social justice and urge the elimination of racism. Homilies can deal with the implications of the Christian faith for prejudice and racist behavior. Parishes can provide opportunities and catechetical material for adults to begin a dialogue about how to address the issues raised here. Parish efforts at evangelization ought to welcome and reach out to people of every race, culture and nationality. In these ways, we can follow Pope Francis’s example in promoting a spirit of dialogue and encounter with others.

We also must be alert to addressing racism wherever we meet it in our communities. In housing, citizens need to insist that the government enforce fair- housing statutes. In the workplace, recruitment, hiring, and promotion policies need to reflect true opportunity. In public education, we can support the teaching of tolerance and appreciation for each culture as we try to do in our own Catholic schools.

In our criminal justice system, we need to insist on fair treatment of all those accused of wrongdoing, and also promote opportunities for rehabilitation for those suffering from substance abuse, and to rebuild the lives for those being released from correctional facilities. In the public debate on the challenges of our age, we need to stand for the dignity of all human life and we ought also to insist on the place of religious faith. Without God and the sense of right and wrong that religious convictions engender, we will never adequately confront racism.

The elimination of racism may seem too great a task for any one of us or even for the whole Church. Yet we place our confidence in the Lord. In Christ, we are brothers and sisters to one another. With Christ, we stand in the Spirit of justice, love and peace. Through Christ, we envision the new city of God, not built by human hands, but by the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ. On the journey to that "new heaven and new earth," we make our way with faith in God’s grace, with hope in our own determination, and above all with love for each other as children of God.

Faithfully in Christ,

Donald Cardinal Wuerl

Archbishop of Washington

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All Saints Day