

Papal Encyclicals and Pastoral Letters Addressing Racism

It is now possible to remove from most of the human race the curse of ignorance. A duty most appropriate in our times, especially for Christians, is to work untiringly to the end that fundamental economic and political decisions are taken, nationally and internationally, which will ensure the recognition and implementation everywhere of everyone's right to human and civil culture in harmony with personal dignity, without distinction of race, sex, nation, religion, or social circumstances.

[**Gaudium et Spes \("The Church in the Modern World"\)**](#), Vatican II, 1965, #60.

Racial discrimination possesses at the moment a character of very great relevance by reason of the tension which it stirs up both within countries and on the international level. Men rightly consider unjustifiable and reject as inadmissible the tendency to maintain or introduce legislation or behavior systematically inspired by racist prejudice. The members of mankind share the same basic rights and duties, as well as the same supernatural destiny. Within a country which belongs to each one, all should be equal before the law, find equal admittance to economic, cultural, civic and social life and benefit from a fair sharing of the nation's riches.

[**Octogesima Adveniens \("A Call to Action"\)**](#), Pope Paul VI, 1971, #16.

Racism is a sin; a sin that 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. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of races. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights. It mocks the words of Jesus: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you." Indeed, racism is more than a disregard for the words of Jesus; it is a denial of the truth of the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation.

[**Brothers and Sisters to Us**](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority. Members of both groups give unwitting approval by accepting things as they are. Perhaps no single individual is to blame. The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices. As our recent pastoral letter on moral values states: "The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not ceased, least we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt in it."

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

Each of us as Catholics must acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past. Many of us have been prisoners of fear and prejudice. We have preached the Gospel while closing our eyes to the racism it condemns. We have allowed conformity to social pressures to replace compliance with social justice.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

Let the Church proclaim to all that the sin of racism defiles the image of God and degrades the sacred dignity of humankind which has been revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation. Let all know that it is a terrible sin that mocks the cross of Christ and ridicules the Incarnation. For the brother and sister of our Brother Jesus Christ are brother and sister to us.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

Racism and economic oppression are distinct but interrelated forces which dehumanize our society. Movement toward authentic justice demands a simultaneous attack on both evils.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

The difficulties of these new times demand a new vision and a renewed courage to transform our society and achieve justice for all. We must fight for the dual goals of racial and economic justice with determination and creativity. There must be no turning back along the road of justice, not sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solutions from another age. For we are the children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all His brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

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.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

Crude and blatant expression of racist sentiment, though they occasionally exist, are today considered bad form. Yet racism itself persists in covert ways. Under the guise of other motives, it is manifest in the tendency to stereotype and marginalize whole segments of the population whose presence perceived as a threat. It is manifest also in the indifference that replaces open hatred.

Many times the new face of racism is the computer print-out, the graph of profits and losses, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

The new forms of racism must be brought face-to-face with the figure of Christ. It is Christ's word that is the judgment on this world; it is Christ's cross that is the measure of our response; and it is Christ's face that is the composite of all persons but in a most significant way of today's poor, today's marginal people, today's minorities.

[Brothers and Sisters to Us](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1979.

The legal system and the criminal justice system both work in a society which bears in its psychological, social, and economic patterns the marks of racism. These marks remain long after the demolition of segregation as a legal institution. The end result of all this is a situation in which those condemned to die are nearly always poor and are disproportionately black...Abolition of the death penalty will not eliminate racism and its effects, an evil which we are called to combat in many different ways. But it is a reasonable judgment that racist attitudes and the social consequences of racism have some influence in determining who is sentenced to die in our society. This we do not regard as acceptable.

[Statement on Capital Punishment](#), U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1980, #3.

We have many gifts from our African past that we must share. Our Blackness is a gift as well as our Catholic faith. By sharing we will enrich our community, our Church, and ourselves.

[What We Have Seen and Heard](#), from the Black Bishops of the United States, 1984, I.

We must encourage Black leaders in the American Church – clergy, religious and lay. Unhappily, we must acknowledge that the major hindrance to the full development of Black leadership within the Church is still racism. Blacks and other minorities are meagerly represented on the decision-making level. Inner-city schools are disappearing and Black vocational recruitment lacks support. This subtle racism still festers within our Church as it does in society. Some progress has been made, but much remains to do. This stain of racism, which is so alien to the Spirit of Christ, is an opportunity to work for renewal through evangelization....The causes of justice and social concern are an essential part of evangelization. To preach to the powerful without denouncing oppression is to trivialize the Gospel. As Black people we must have concern for those who hunger and thirst for justice throughout the world. We must not ignore those whom others tend to forget, and even contribute our efforts and money. When we share our talents and our possessions with the forgotten ones of this world, we share Christ. This is the essence of evangelization itself.

[What We Have Seen and Heard](#), from the Black Bishops of the United States, 1984, II.

John Paul II in turn reaffirmed: “Man’s creation by God ‘in his own image’ confers upon every human person an eminent dignity; it also postulates the fundamental equality of all human beings. For the Church, this equality, which is rooted in man’s being, acquires the dimension of an altogether special brotherhood through the Incarnation of the Son of God.... In the Redemption effected by Jesus Christ the Church sees a further basis of the rights and duties of the human person. Hence every form of discrimination based on race...is absolutely unacceptable.”

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #17.

This principle of the equal dignity of all persons, of whatever race, already finds solid support in the sciences and a firm basis in philosophy, ethics and religions in general. The Christian faith respects this intuition, this affirmation, and rejoices in it. It represents a considerable convergence among the various disciplines which reinforces the convictions of the majority of people of good will and allows the drawing up of universal declarations, conventions and international agreements for the protection of human rights, and the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination. It is in this sense that Paul VI spoke about “an axiom of the highest human wisdom of all times.”

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #18.

Faith in the one God, Creator and Redeemer of all humankind made in his image and likeness, constitutes the absolute and inescapable negation of any racist ideologies. It is still necessary to draw out all the consequences of this: “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion, for all men are created in God’s image.”

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #19.

The Church has therefore the vocation in the midst of the world to be the people redeemed and reconciled with God and among themselves, forming “one body, one spirit in Christ,” and giving witness before all to respect and love. “Every nation under heaven” was symbolically represented in Jerusalem at Pentecost, the antitype and victory over the dispersion of Babel. As Peter said, when he was called to the house of the pagan, Cornelius, “God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.... God shows no partiality....” The Church has the sublime vocation of realizing, first of all within herself, the unity of humankind over and above any ethnic, cultural, national, social or other divisions in order to signify precisely that such divisions are now obsolete, having been abolished by the cross of Christ.

The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society, Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #22.

The Second Vatican Council has rightly defined the Church as “sacrament, a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men” since “both Christ and the Church. . . transcend the distinctions of race and nationality.” Within the Church “no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex” should exist. This is indeed the meaning of the word “Catholic”-i.e., universal, which is one of the marks of the Church. As the Church spreads, this catholicity becomes more manifest.

The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society, Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #22.

Equality does not mean uniformity. It is important to recognize the diversity and complementarity of one another’s cultural riches and moral qualities. Equality of treatment therefore implies a certain recognition of differences which minorities themselves demand in order to develop according to their own specific characteristics, in respect for others and for the common good of society and the world community. No human group, however, can boast of having a natural superiority over others, or of exercising any discrimination that affects the basic rights of the person.

The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society, Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #23.

Doctrine and examples by themselves are not sufficient. The victims of racism, wherever they may be, must be defended. Acts of discrimination among persons and peoples for racist or other reasons-religious or ideological-and which lead to contempt and to the phenomena of exclusion, must be denounced and brought to light without hesitation and strongly rejected in order to promote equitable behavior, legislative dispositions and social structures.

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #26.

Racism will disappear from legal texts only when it dies in people's hearts. However, there must also be direct action in the legislative field. Wherever discriminatory laws still exist, the citizens who are aware of the perversity of this ideology must assume their responsibilities so that, through democratic processes, legislation will be put in harmony with the moral law. Within a given State, the law must be equal for all citizens without distinction. A dominant group, whether numerically in the majority or minority, can never do as it likes with the basic rights of other groups. It is important for ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities who live within the borders of the same State, to enjoy recognition of the same inalienable rights as other citizens, including the right to live together according to their specific cultural and religious characteristics. Their choice to be integrated into the surrounding culture must be a free one.

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #29.

The 1965 U.N. Convention expressed this conviction forcefully: "Any doctrine of superiority based on the difference between races is scientifically false, morally condemnable and socially unjust and dangerous." The Church's doctrine affirms it with no less vigor: all racist theories are contrary to Christian faith and love. And yet, in sharp contrast to this growing awareness of human dignity, 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.

[The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society](#), Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, 1988, #33.

The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Vatican, 1992, #1935.

Access to employment and to professions must be open to all without unjust discrimination: men and women, healthy and disabled, natives and immigrants. For its part society should, according to circumstances, help citizens find work and employment."

Catechism of the Catholic Church, The Vatican, 1992, #2433.

The Christian should never make racist claims or indulge in racist or discriminatory behaviour, but sadly that has not always been the case in practice nor has it been so in history. In this regard, Pope John Paul II wanted to mark the Jubilee of the Year 2000 by requests for pardon made in the name of the Church, so that the Church's memory might be purified from all "forms of counter-witness and scandal" (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Tertio millennio adveniente, n. 33) which have taken place in the past millennium (cf. International Theological Commission, Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past.)).

[Contributions to World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance](#), Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, 2001, #6.

The international community is aware that the roots of racism, discrimination and intolerance are found in prejudice and ignorance, which are first of all the fruits of sin, but also of faulty and inadequate education (cf. CR, Part IV, n. 28). To take a main theme of the Durban Conference, the role of education, understood as a "good practice to be promoted" in the struggle against these evils, is fundamental. In this regard too, the Catholic Church recalls her very extensive active role "on the ground", in educating and instructing young people of every confession and on every continent through many centuries.

[Contributions to World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance](#), Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace, 2001, #13.

Quoting from the Bishops of Asia: “Harmony is not simply the absence of strife. . . . The test of true harmony lies in acceptance of diversity and richness.”

[Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith](#), U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Committee on Migration, 2001, III.

I believe that two broad types of racism need to be recognized and resisted: individual and institutional. Individual racism is evident when a person adopts attitudes or takes actions that are based on the assumption of racial superiority. Such attitudes and actions violate the rights and dignity of other people because of race. A second type of racism is institutional or structural. This type of racism exists where patterns of racial superiority are embedded in the systems and institutions of society. Such racism is less blatant and more complex, but it exists nonetheless. It is present wherever systems and institutions are created and maintained in such a way that they provide privilege or prejudice for one race over others. This type of racism can be seen, to varying degrees, in many of our social, economic, and political structures, including the structures of our Church.

In God’s Image: Pastoral Letter on Racism, Archbishop Harry Flynn of Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 2003, #5 & 6.

Racism is a serious offense against God precisely because it violates the innate dignity of the human person. At its core racism is a failure to love our neighbor. Since we cannot claim to love God unless we love our neighbor, we can only be one with God if we reject racism and work aggressively to remove it from our personal lives, our church, and our society.

In God’s Image: Pastoral Letter on Racism, Archbishop Harry Flynn of Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 2003, #30.

I concur with my predecessor, Archbishop Roach, who said, “An appreciation of racial diversity begins with an understanding of how our own lives are affected by skin color and race. Each of us should examine how our thinking and our actions are influenced by the color of our skin. How has my skin color enhanced my life or hindered me, helped or prevented me from understanding people of other races? How can I enhance my own life by learning more about other races?” (Reviving the Common Good, 1991)

In God's Image: Pastoral Letter on Racism, Archbishop Harry Flynn of Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 2003, #35.

It is not enough, however, to have a growing number of culturally specific worshipping communities. Our goal must be to create intercultural communities—where people of different cultures become part of one community in which all are transformed in Christ. In these communities, different cultural groups can maintain their unique cultural practices, but they participate in one diverse community in which all are enriched and all welcome one another.

In God's Image: Pastoral Letter on Racism, Archbishop Harry Flynn of Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, 2003, #48.

As we confront our own complicity with the sin of racism, may we constantly refer back to that all-important teaching as a reminder of why we need to root racism out of our hearts, our culture, and the institutions of our society. You and I cannot truly be the reflection which our God desires until we have rooted out any traces of racism in our own hearts and decided to embrace all human persons as our brothers and sisters.

Created **In God's Image: Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism**, Bishop Dale Melczek of the Diocese of Gary, 2003, pg 1.

Racism is a sin, and its practice is contrary to the teaching of Scripture and the Church.

Created In God's Image: Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism, Bishop Dale Melczek of the Diocese of Gary, 2003, Part I, pg 6.

Since our culture influences institutions as well as individuals, racism has expressed itself in a manner referred to as institutional racism. Sociologically this is an ideology which prevents many from becoming fully included in society and enjoying the opportunities which are open to others. Institutional racism is primarily manifested in laws, or in the practices and procedures of an institution such as a financial company, health facility, government office, school, church, the media, etc... Thus, the sin of racism is seen as social. It is not just the sin of individuals but has become so ingrained in the institutions of society itself that it is a social as well as personal sin.

Created In God's Image: Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism, Bishop Dale Melczek of the Diocese of Gary, 2003, Part II, pg 15.

The history of the Church shows that Christianity does not have simply one cultural expression, but rather, “remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, it will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root”.[88] In the diversity of peoples who experience the gift of God, each in accordance with its own culture, the Church expresses her genuine catholicity and shows forth the “beauty of her varied face.”

[Evangelii Gaudium \(“Joy of the Gospel”\)](#), Pope Francis, 2013, Chapter 3, #116.

We join our voices with civic and religious leaders in pledging to work for healing and reconciliation. Our efforts must address racism and the violence so visible today. As the U.S. Catholic Bishops said in our pastoral letter on racism, “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 community stands with all people who struggle for an end to racism and violence, in our families, in our places of worship, in our communities and in our world. We must continue to build bridges and we must confront racism and violence with a commitment to life, a vision of hope, and a call to action.

Statement from Archbishop Kurtz, President of the U.S. Bishops Conference, June 19, 2015.

A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today's globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity. Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself. As life and the world are dynamic realities, so our care for the world must also be flexible and dynamic. Merely technical solutions run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems. There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process which takes

place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture. Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group.

[Laudato Si' \("Praise Be"\)](#), Pope Francis, 2015, Chapter 4, #144.

The message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity. It overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis. Diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a “reconciled diversity”. As the bishops of the Congo have put it: “Our ethnic diversity is our wealth... It is only in unity, through conversion of hearts and reconciliation, that we will be able to help our country to develop on all levels.”

[Evangelii Gaudium \("Joy of the Gospel"\)](#), Pope Francis, 2013, Chapter 4, #230.