



KEY TERMS

Ethnicity: A category of people who identify with each other based on similarities such as common ancestry, language, history, society, culture, or nation.

Race: Distinction based on the color of skin. The Church has maintained that all humans are created equal and endowed with a rational soul (intellect, will, memory). Any prejudice and mistreatment on the basis of race is to be roundly rejected.

Racism: Unjust discrimination on the basis of a person's race; a violation of human dignity and a sin against justice. It is a culture which was perpetuated by both personal dispositions as well as systems and institutions of Western culture.

Social Sin: The effect of sin over time, which can affect society and its institutions to create "structures of sin" that oppress and violate the dignity of human beings.

TEACHING

Fear. Discouragement. Confusion. Anger. Discomfort. Resistance. Sadness. Defensiveness. Indifference. Shame. Uncertainty. Helplessness.

There are many intense emotions and reactions that come with conversations about race and racism, which make these conversations all the more difficult to have. Why even bring it up then? As Christians, we proclaim that every person is created in the image and likeness of God and no person is excluded from the inherent dignity this grants. We are driven by the mission of Jesus to proclaim the love of God to all people, and we recognize the power of Jesus to unite us as one body through the Sacrament of Baptism.

We also know from St. Paul that when one part of this body suffers, we all suffer. While it is never easy, it is our Christian duty to take time to recognize the way people around us are suffering. During the next four Life Nights, we are going to confront the difficulties, discomfort, and challenges together so we can grow in our awareness of the sinful reality of racism and the way it impacts individuals and the Body of Christ as a whole.

Genesis 1:27
1 Corinthians 12:26

To help us begin a dialogue about race, we have to understand a few terms first. Race refers to distinctions based on skin color. It is not to be confused with ethnicity, which is an anthropological term that groups people together based on common ancestry, language, history, society, culture, or nation.

Pastoral Note: The distinction made between these two terms is for the purpose of having a common language during this series. It is important to emphasize that these definitions, as with other terms used in this series, are ever evolving and that they will most likely encounter these terms in a different way outside of this series (e.g., on college forms, in different groups of people, etc.).

The Church's teachings recognize the beauty of ethnic differences among her members, and have maintained that all humans are created equal. Without exception, the Church rejects any form of prejudice and mistreatment toward others, especially that which is based on race or ethnicity, and instead offers a hope and movement toward unity despite divisions of this nature.

CCC 855

Racism, then, is the unjust discrimination on the basis of a person's race. It is a violation of human dignity and a sin against justice. Unfortunately, this is a sin that occurs systemically, meaning it does not just happen on an individual level but has given "rise to social situations and institutions that are contrary to the divine goodness." For example, after segregation laws were overturned, many schools and businesses created policies to dissuade people of color from attending schools or workplaces. Today, as a result of these policies, there are still schools and businesses that consider natural and/or protective hairstyles on a black man or woman unacceptable or unprofessional. We call this "social sin." Because it is rooted in sin, it is an issue of faith, not just human rights or social justice. The evil of systemic racial injustice lies not solely in that it is a bad system that hurts people — it is a bad system that hurts people because it goes against God's very nature, which is goodness itself.

CCC 1869

Racism, both in its personal and institutional manifestations, contradicts our desire to live in the light of Christ. Scripture tells us that "if we seek to live in the light but hate our brother, then we remain in the darkness." While we may not personally hate other people based on their race or skin color, we all have a stake in the systems that allow racial injustice to continue in us and in the institutions that have come about as a result of this sin. If we are aware of the social sin but choose to ignore it, we become participants in it. As part of our desire to grow in holiness, to seek to live in and reflect the light of Christ, we are called to recognize the effects of racism in ourselves, our country, and our Church if we are to begin to undo it.

1 John 2:7-11

A CULTURE IN STRUGGLE

There is an underlying set of meanings and values attached to skin color in Western culture, and in unique ways in the United States, which causes us to interpret skin color in a particular way. It goes much further than isolated instances of discrimination, though these do occur. You may have even seen or heard of some examples: teens who spray paint derogatory words outside the home of an immigrant family, girls taught to cross the street if they see a man of color walking in their direction, or a fellow student making rude comments about an entire ethnic group during history class. Individual cases like these point to a greater culture of racism, indicating that there is a wide-spread system of meaning, identity, and significance tied to race in this country. There are countless historical and present-day circumstances that prove this to be the case.

When America was first being established in the 18th century, it permitted the enslavement of men, women, and children who were shipped to the country from various African nations to provide a free-labor source for white Americans. Since it was legal to exploit Africans for economic benefit, they were considered property, not people. Slave-owners kept slaves in subhuman conditions by inflicting violent punishments and rape, limiting or withholding access to education, and preventing their conversion to certain religions.

Even after the legal abolition of slavery in 1865, Jim Crow laws, which ensured the segregation of white and black Americans, existed for nearly 100 years before they were abolished in 1964. The civil rights movement, led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called for the end of such laws and fought for equal rights for citizens of all skin colors. Most public settings remained divided, though, and

violence against black Americans was not uncommon. The act of desegregation took a considerably long time — and in some cases, is still taking place.

Lots of other areas of life in America today have been affected as a result of these foundations. There is inequality for black Americans in access to housing and in how they are judged by the judicial system. For example, studies show that black Americans make up 29 percent of those arrested for drug law violations, but 40 percent (almost half) of those who are incarcerated for drug law violations. Systemic racial injustice has very much formed the internal dispositions and biases of American citizens, creating a culture of negative perceptions toward black people and those of other ethnicities — Native American, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Middle Eastern, etc.

Drugpolicy.org: “The Drug War, Mass Incarceration, and Race”

A CHURCH DIVIDED

Unfortunately, even within the history of the Church, there has been division along racial lines. The Church, as divinely instituted by Jesus, is perfect and does not err in her teachings. The human dimension of the Church, however, is imperfect because of the sinful nature of humanity. The Church has a clear teaching on the dignity of the human person and speaks out against the sin of racism, but because of the fear or complacency of individuals, this teaching has not always been promoted or lived.

Catholicism came to America in the mid-19th century, while slavery was still legal. In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI issued a papal bull condemning the slave trade in the Americas. In 1958, four years after the civil rights movement began formally mobilizing marches, boycotts, sit-ins, and other demonstrations, the United States bishops issued another document that addressed issues of race. In 1968, the year that Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, the pastoral letter “The National Race Crisis” was shared. This

was the first time the Church had a sense of urgency around taking action against racial injustice. In 1979, the bishops issued “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” which named racism as a sin for the very first time in the history of the American Catholic Church — 25 years after the start of the civil rights movement. Most recently in 2018, the United States bishops issued a pastoral letter, “Open Wide Our Hearts,” calling on Catholics once more to combat the sin of racism that is still present today

In Supremo Apostolatus

Despite the authority of the Church at the highest level (the pope) condemning the slave trade, slavery and its aftermath have impacted the Church in America, causing a slow response to racial discrimination. This is largely due to many individual people, lay faithful and Church hierarchy alike, who misinterpreted or willfully disregarded the teachings.

The American Church’s slow response to racism gave way to her own participation in the same discriminatory and prejudiced systems of secular society, which the bishops apologized for in 1992. For the larger part of the 20th century, no black man was accepted into any Catholic seminary and black women were excluded from entering religious convents. The Catholic Mass itself was often segregated, with some parishes moving Catholics of color to restricted areas in the sanctuary or into the Church basement, and sometimes sending them to a separate building on the parish grounds.

*National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992:
A Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and
Recommitting Ourselves as a People, 2*

For concrete examples, refer to lives of Venerable Augustus Tolton and Mother Mary Lange of the Oblate Sisters of Providence.

AT THE TABLE OF CHRIST

The history of racism is long and complicated, but we cannot be afraid to acknowledge the numerous events that reveal deep-seeded systems of racial injustice. We cannot ignore the many men and women who cry out to the Lord because they have been hurt by racial injustice and discrimination. We also cannot look past the differences that exist among us because they are all a part of the plan of God — a plan for “the mutual enrichment of cultures,” a plan that helps us learn from one another and journey to heaven together. As followers of Christ, we should be lovers of this plan and actively fight against the sin of racism in and outside of ourselves.

When we talk about the systemic injustice of racism, we quickly realize that it is essential for us to take a second look at the origin and purpose of the systems we encounter everyday. Oftentimes, we need to “reset” these systems so they are more equitable. For example, institutions for education are essential to a just society, but there may be systems at work within the education system (like biased dress code regulations) that need to be reevaluated. When working for racial justice, it is not enough to simply end internal racial discrimination or mistreatment of people based on their skin color. Like in our opening activity, there are certain systems that have to be “reset” or re-worked.

If this is the case, though, we are in for a tough task. How do you evaluate structures and redirect them without making the same mistakes as the last one? Where do you look for a new design? What materials should be used? How exactly should the table be reset?

A truly Catholic response to injustice is not just one that destroys and overthrows for the sake of undoing what is there. The Lord has set us apart with a vision of how to rebuild and plant, so there will be fruit and life around this newly reset table. In this series, we have been discussing how racism is one of those structures that is embedded in the fabric of our country, but it is not compatible with Christianity or the desire to follow Jesus. In our walk with Christ, we are invited to come up with a new kind of plan for the table. The Lord calls us to rebuild and plant according to a whole new approach: one that condemns racism and all of its effects and takes steps toward building a society that is free from its grasp.

BEST KEPT SECRET

Catholic Social Teaching is the Church’s best kept secret because its very principles have the potential to heal the wounds of racial injustice. It first and foremost honors life and the dignity of the human person, which is critical to any endeavor looking to create peace and promote justice in the world.

The dignity of the human person drives our fight against the injustice of racism because it recognizes that every one of our brothers and sisters, in their individual and infinite worth, is worth defending. Social justice can only be possible if and when we root all actions in the truth that every single human being has a dignity given to them by their creator that we must protect.

CCC 1929

Catholic Social Teaching also emphasizes the common good, or the principle that the Church and state ought to care for the greatest good of all persons. This does not mean we do the thing that will benefit the most people; rather, we work intentionally so each person is enabled to achieve their perfection.

Mater et Magistra, 65

Another principle of Catholic Social Teaching that is critical to resetting the table for a more just system is solidarity, “a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone.” It goes beyond feeling sorry for people who suffer from racial injustice or any other kind of systemic oppression and recognizes the unity that the Church tries to instill in each of her members. The principle of solidarity requires a concrete commitment to action and a firm desire to work for the common good.

Caritas in Veritate, 38

Finally, Catholic Social Teaching favors distributive justice, which requires that a community give to its citizens in proportion to what they give and need. Again, the goal is not simply equality, but equity — a system through which all are given opportunities according to their circumstances. This helps us respond to racist systems because it allows us to see how working for the justice of one racial group doesn’t diminish the value of another — it just means repairing the injustices they have suffered.

THE URGENCY FOR JUSTICE

Read CCC 2446.

Our Christian call to recognize the dignity of every human person, no matter their skin color or ethnic makeup, makes it absolutely critical that we work for justice. It is not just a good thing to do — it is what we owe people. Taking care of the needs of others is giving them what is due to them. It is not just our being kind or being a good person — it makes us agents of justice.

CCC 2446

In addition to it being a matter of debt to our fellow brothers and sisters, it is also crucial for making God’s plan for us a reality. “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.” The Church is clear: there is no room in the Christian person or institution for any form of racial injustice.

CCC 1935

Any offense of this kind must be eliminated. They are not to be made small, to be excused, or to be seen as insignificant by any means. Instead, we should view them as sinful and work to eliminate them inasmuch as we are able. “The equal dignity of human persons requires the effort... [toward] the elimination of sinful inequalities.” Each of us has to do our part to rid our society of racial injustice.

CCC 1947

When we work toward racial justice, we are preparing for heaven. *Read Revelation 7:9.*

The Book of Revelation describes a vision of heaven that is diverse, with a multitude of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue. As we seek to reset the table, we have to make sure it mirrors that vision. In this way, we make the Kingdom present to us even now.

SELF-AWARE, US-AWARE

Before we can really begin any of this work of evaluating and rebuilding, we must become aware of our own place within this system and how it has formed us. Are we in a position that has been negatively affected by the structures that create racial injustice? Have we been hurt and discriminated against? Or do we benefit from the system? Have we been given opportunities simply because certain social structures favor people like us? Do we participate in racial discrimination through our attitudes and dispositions?

MAKING ROOM

Making room means listening to each other's experiences of race. Making room means acknowledging the evil of racism and where we have been complicit, and confessing when we have participated in it. Making room means identifying the areas in which we are privileged. Making room means finding hope in spite of discrimination. Making room means rolling up our sleeves and working for a more equitable and just society. Each of us can be instruments of such renewal because we have been made new in the waters of Baptism.

Baptism clothes us in Christ, conferring a radical equality in all of us. It calls us to live by a different standard. Through the grace of the Sacrament, we can be who Christ says we are, renouncing racial evil and proclaiming one Father as one family.

CONVERSION AND MERCY

Our Savior is one of deep love and radical mercy, which informs the way we ought to live. Conversion is a sign that God's transforming power is alive and well. Through it, we have hope that individuals might be redirected toward goodness, but also institutions and entire groups of people as well. In that way, we hope in the power of God's love over hearts to overcome even the ugliest manifestations of racism.

Racial solidarity — an act of identifying with the experience of our brothers and sisters in regard to race — is a paschal experience. This means that it is an experience that participates in the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus. It first demands death: death to a false sense of self and view of others. It requires a commitment to being aware of racial privilege and allowing that awareness to change behaviors that leverage privilege unjustly while also informing the way we serve others. Only by dying to ourselves can we experience the new life of Resurrection that welcomes us into the Kingdom of God — a Kingdom for all people.

It is only by allowing God's grace to work through the human person that social changes really happen. The conversion of

our hearts serves as the first step toward remedying unjust social institutions and sinful structures. When we allow God to conform us personally to the norms of justice, good can be achieved by the larger society.

CCC 1888

Research Sr. Thea Bowman.

She personally experienced the effects of racial injustice as the granddaughter of former slaves and a black woman growing up in the southern United States. Her faithfulness to the Gospel gave her great credibility in the Church. Eventually, some bishops charged her with compiling a Catholic hymnal that was specifically made for black Catholics. Her personal commitment to fighting for justice in light of the Gospel made an impact on the way the Catholic Church served its black members. From her individual actions came a greater, systemic change.

FOOD FOR ALL

The original design of God is that there is one table at which everyone has a place, but throughout human history, we have created many different tables that are faulty and exclusive.

We have a call to action that is inspired by our faith and the many glimpses it provides of what love and unity can look like. We know that we can find refuge around the table of the Lord because when we are there, we are all one in the love of Jesus.

This is a great power revealed to us in the Eucharist: The real presence of the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus, blurs any and every distinction between hosts and guest, need and plenty. In the gift of His very self, our Lord gives us a counter-identity: one of love and solidarity, one that does not judge based on skin color or ethnicity. It only looks to transform us into what we have received — Christ Himself.

GATHER 'ROUND THE JUST TABLE

That same hope and faith in Jesus require us to accept the invitation to serve as agents of equity, inclusivity, unity, and real Christian love in a racially divided world.

This task “involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike.” It is a great task, though, and it goes beyond what any one of us can do alone — we need to rely on something beyond ourselves to make it a reality. As we go forth from this series, leave the walls of this youth room, go past the borders of our parish or school, we must remember to always place our hope “in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit.”

CCC 822

Through Christ, each and every one us can be instruments of a new kind of table; one that has chairs for everyone, where neighbors are respected and loved and where people make room for each other. So long as we remain just people, so too will this newly structured table remain just.

CCC 2832

There are small actions that can take us in this direction: you can kindly correct a friend who makes an insensitive comment to or about a classmate of color. You can share your stories of encountering injustice and help others avoid hurting others like you were hurt. You can help members of your family learn about how racism is an issue of faith as well as of social justice. You can help someone feel like they belong even if they are the only person of color in the room. You can lend an understanding ear to a person who is feeling unloved because of their skin color. You can encourage your parish to be more inclusive to people of different ethnic backgrounds. You can self-evaluate based on what this series has taught you about your attitudes and dispositions regarding race.

Each individual action you take toward justice is a step taken to undo unjust systems. The more we speak up in favor of justice for people of every race, the more chairs we pull up so they can join us at the table, and the more like heaven Earth will be.

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