

Rejoice in the Lord

**By Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark**

Racism violates human dignity



In November 2018, we bishops of the United States issued a pastoral letter against racism entitled, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love: A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*. Although our conference has spoken out against racism many times in the past, we believed that the increasing incidents of violence and injustice in our nation warranted a renewed commitment on our part to call attention to the evils of racist thought, speech and actions. The events of recent months make this clear teaching more important than ever.

According to our pastoral letter, “Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred.” This fundamental truth—that all are made in God’s image and, therefore, all are equal in the sight of God—grounds all Catholic social teaching. Racist attitudes and actions violate human dignity and are deeply offensive to God and to all our sisters and brothers in the human family.

Historically, many groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese, have been subjected to racial and ethnic prejudice in our country. Many groups are still experiencing prejudice, including rising anti-Semitism, the discrimination many Hispanics face today, and anti-Muslim sentiment. Especially significant are the unique experiences of Native and African American communities, which suffered from terrible, systematic abuses in the past and whose effects continue to cause widespread suffering today.

What can we do to overcome the evil of racism and to ensure that the positive steps we take are not eroded over time by a return to racist attitudes and actions? As we write in *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*:

“Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist. Overcoming racism is a demand

of justice, but because Christian love transcends justice, the end of racism will mean that our community will bear fruit beyond simply the fair treatment of all.

When each man, woman and child is treated with the dignity and respect they deserve, a whole host of cultural, economic and political problems will be solved. No longer will individuals or groups feel the need to inflate their egos by condescending or abusive attitudes and behaviors. The results will include stronger families, communities that are at peace with their neighbors, and a nation that is healthy and prosperous.

Racism—whether subtle or blatant—is a poison that we cannot tolerate. Our Lord challenges us to refrain from judging one another, to love everyone and to treat one another as we would want to be treated. As Pope Francis teaches (see below), “We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.”

In our pastoral letter, we say: “Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful. Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice. They reveal a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended, to recognize them as the neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt 22:39).”

Let’s pray that the grace of Christ will give us the courage to acknowledge the sin of racism. Let’s work hard to eliminate racism wherever it exists today and to prevent it from returning in the days ahead.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph W. Tobin" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

A Selection from the US Bishops' pastoral letter on racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love* (pages 3-8)

What Is Racism?

Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful. Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice. They reveal a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended, to recognize them as the neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt 22:39).



Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred. Cain forgets this truth in his hatred of his brother. Recall the words in the First Letter of John: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him” (1 Jn 3:15). Racism shares in the same evil that moved Cain to kill his brother. It arises from suppressing the truth that his brother Abel was also created in the image of God, a human equal to himself. Every racist act—every such comment, every joke, every disparaging look as a reaction to the color of skin, ethnicity, or place of origin—is a failure to acknowledge another person as a brother or sister, created in the image of God. In these and in many other such acts, the sin of racism persists in our lives, in our country, and in our world.

Racism comes in many forms. It can be seen in deliberate, sinful acts. In recent times, we have seen bold expressions of racism by groups as well as individuals. The re-appearance of symbols of hatred, such as nooses and swastikas in public spaces, is a tragic indicator of rising racial and ethnic animus. All too often, Hispanics and African Americans, for example, face discrimination in hiring, housing, educational opportunities, and incarceration. Racial profiling frequently targets Hispanics for selective immigration enforcement practices, and African Americans, for suspected criminal activity. There is also the growing fear and harassment of persons from majority Muslim countries. Extreme nationalist ideologies are feeding the American public discourse with xenophobic rhetoric that instigates fear against foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. Finally, too often, racism comes in the form of the sin of omission, when individuals, communities, and even churches remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when it is encountered.

Racism can often be found in our hearts—in many cases, placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture. As such, it can lead to thoughts and actions that we do not even see as racist, but nonetheless, flow from the same prejudicial root. Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits. Racism can also be institutional when practices or traditions are upheld that treat certain groups of people unjustly. The cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that makes us all accomplices in racism.

We read the headlines that report the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement officials. In our prisons, the number of inmates of color, notably those who are brown and black, is grossly disproportionate.

Despite the great blessings of liberty that this country offers, we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger. At the same time, we reject harsh rhetoric that belittles and dehumanizes law enforcement personnel who labor to keep our communities safe. We also condemn violent attacks against police.

We have also seen years of systemic racism working in how resources are allocated to communities that remain de facto segregated. As an example, the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, resulted from policy decisions that negatively affected the inhabitants, the majority of whom were African Americans. We could go on, for the instances of discrimination, prejudice, and racism, sadly, are too many.

At significant times in our history, the bishops have written to express their pastoral concern over the scourge of racism, which some have called our country's original sin. In 1958, the bishops wrote to condemn the blatant forms of racism found in segregation and "Jim Crow" laws.

Ten years later, they wrote to condemn the scandal of racism and the policies and actions that led to so much frustration that violence erupted in many cities. In 1979, the bishops wrote on how racism still affected so many of our brothers and sisters, highlighting the structural and institutional forms of racial injustice evident in the economic imbalances found in our society.

With the positive changes that arose from the civil rights movement and related civil rights legislation, some may believe that racism is no longer a major affliction of our society—that it is only found in the hearts of individuals who can be dismissed as ignorant or unenlightened. But racism still profoundly affects our culture, and it has no place in the Christian heart. This evil causes great harm to its victims, and it corrupts the souls of those who harbor racist or prejudicial thoughts. The persistence of the evil of racism is why we are writing this letter now. People are still being harmed, so action is still needed.

What is needed and what we are calling for is a genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change and the reform of our institutions and society. Conversion is a long road to travel for the individual. Moving our nation to a full realization of the promise of liberty, equality, and

justice for all is even more challenging. However, in Christ, we can find the strength and the grace necessary to make that journey.

In this regard, each of us should adopt the words of Pope Francis as our own: Let no one “think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.”

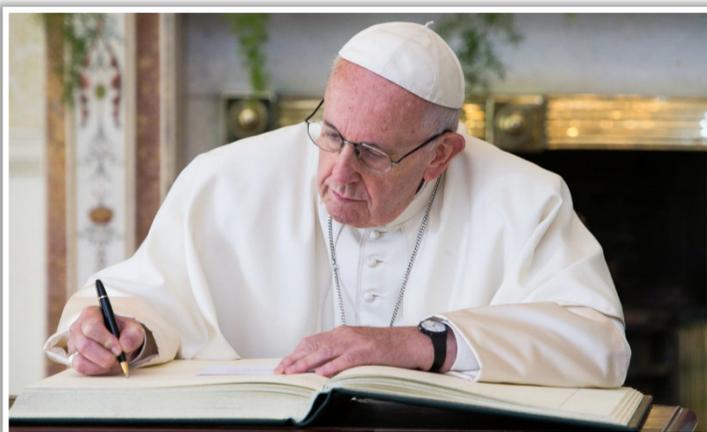
All of us are in need of personal, ongoing conversion. Our churches and our civic and social institutions are in need of ongoing reform. If racism is confronted by addressing its causes and the injustice it produces, then healing can occur. In that transformed reality, the headlines we see all too often today will become lessons from the past.

How do we overcome this evil of rejecting a brother or sister’s humanity, the same evil that provoked Cain’s sin? What are the necessary steps that would lead to this conversion? We find our inspiration in the words of the prophet Micah:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God. (Mi 6:8)

To do justice requires an honest acknowledgment of our failures and the restoring of right relationships between us. “If we acknowledge our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing” (1 Jn 1:9). To love goodness demands pursuing “what leads to peace and to building up one another” (Rom 14:19). It requires a determined effort, but even more so, it requires humility; it requires each of us to ask for the grace needed to overcome this sin and get rid of this scourge. In what follows, we hope to provide a Christian call for all of us in this country to “walk humbly with our God” so that, by his grace, racism will be eradicated.

A Message from Pope Francis: Words of Challenge and Hope



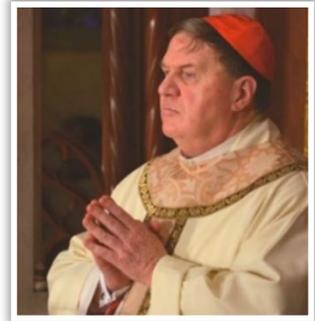
I have witnessed with great concern the disturbing social unrest in your nation in these past days, following the tragic death of Mr. George Floyd. We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.

At the same time, we have to recognize that the violence of recent nights is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence, and so much is lost.

Let us pray for the consolation of their grieving families and friends and let us implore the national reconciliation and peace for which we yearn. May Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of America, intercede for all those who work for peace and justice in your land and throughout the world. (Pope Francis, General Audience, June 3, 2020)

My Prayer for You

I would like to make my own the prayer that concludes the US Bishops' pastoral letter on racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*.



Mary, friend and mother to all, through your Son, God has found a way to unite himself to every human being, called to be one people, sisters and brothers to each other.

We ask for your help in calling on your Son, seeking forgiveness for the times when we have failed to love and respect one another. We ask for your help in obtaining from your Son the grace we need to overcome the evil of racism and to build a just society.

We ask for your help in following your Son, so that prejudice and animosity will no longer infect our minds or hearts but will be replaced with a love that respects the dignity of each person.

Mother of the Church, the Spirit of your Son, Jesus, warms our hearts: pray for us. Amen †

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.

