
(Excerpts)


II. A NEW AWARENESS OF THE RACIAL DIVIDE AND A CALL TO CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE
(Our Christmas faith emboldens us to enter this conversation.)

(8) Our Holy Father, Pope Francis has selected the theme “No Longer Slaves, But Brothers and Sisters” for the 2015 World Day of Peace celebration. Human slavery can take many forms, including the literal enslavement of human beings by other human beings which, sadly, continues to exist in our world today. There are also forms of social, emotional and psychological slavery: slavery to prejudice, racism, bias, anger, frustration, rage, violence, and bitterness in the face of systemic injustices. Regrettably, these forms of slavery endure in the United States and they are born from the tragedy of the European “slave trade” that captured innocent human beings from West Africa and brought them to the United States to be “sold,” “bought,” and “owned” in bondage to work on the lucrative plantations in southern states. Long after the cruel evil of slavery was ended, its consequences continued to cast a shadow over our nation as a racial divide. Recent dramatic eruptions of racial conflict have made this shadow more apparent. Painful “breaking news” accounts call all Americans to re dedicate themselves to the work of peace and reconciliation among our citizens of different races; ethnic origins; and social, cultural, educational, economic, and religious backgrounds. As Catholics, as members of the Body of Christ, the Church, this is more than a call; it is our vocation, born of baptism.

(12) ....The work of police officers is very difficult and very dangerous. Because of the violence in American society, they leave their homes each day not knowing if they will return unharmed. They deserve our respect and gratitude. They are forced to make split-second, life and death decisions on which their lives and the lives of others depend. In some communities, many police officers are faithful Christians, who strive to live by the Gospel. Every community needs dedicated police officers to keep order and to protect the citizens and their property. Most police are fair-minded and respect the human dignity and worth of all citizens. Some, however, are not. There is credible evidence that bias and prejudice influence the attitudes and actions of some police officers, no matter what their race or nationality may be. Significantly, 57% of African-American police believe Black offenders are treated with far less respect by White officers than White offenders. However, only 5% of White officers agree that this is true. It is a fact that some young Black men commit crimes requiring their arrest by the police. However, this should not lead to the demonization of all Black men as dangerous, violent criminals. It is a fact that some White police officers use excessive force and display racial prejudice when they interact with Black men suspected of crimes. However, this should not lead to the demonization of all White police officers as racists ready to kill Black men at the slightest provocation.

(14) .... I have had two personal experiences with law enforcement officers that made me very conscious of the fact that simply by being me, I could be the cause of suspicion and concern without doing anything wrong. The first experience was when I was a young Priest. The second was when I was already a Bishop. In both cases I was not in clerical attire. I was dressed informally.

(15) In the first experience, I was simply walking down a street in an apparently all-White neighborhood. A police car drove up beside me and the officer asked, “What are you doing in this area? Do you live around here? Where is your car? You should not be wandering around neighborhoods where you do not live.” I never told him I was a Catholic Priest, but I wondered what it was I was doing to attract the attention of the officer? This was long before I heard the expression, “walking while Black.”

(16) In the second experience, I was driving in my car in an apparently all-White neighborhood with two small chairs in the back seat and a table in the partially open trunk tied with a rope. A police car with flashing lights pulled me over. The officer asked, “Where are you going with that table and those chairs? Before I could answer, he asked, “Where did you get them? Then he said, “We had a call about a suspicious person driving through the area with possibly stolen furniture in his trunk.” I wondered what I was doing to make someone suspicious. Many years would pass before I would hear the expression “racial profiling.”

III. TRAYVON MARTIN, OSCAR GRANT, JOHN CRAWFORD III, MICHAEL BROWN, JR., ERIC GARNER, AND TAMIR RICE
(This is a summary of the known facts about the deaths of six African-American males and the international protests that followed.)
IV. WHAT WE HAVE SEEN AND HEARD
(This is an invitation to reflect upon these events within the context of the Church’s teachings and actions concerning the racial divide in America.)

(49) In the face of the racial tensions that have emerged in the wake of these deaths and other events, Catholic Bishops such as Archbishop Robert Carlson of St. Louis have called for renewed efforts to overcome racial injustice, while urging those who exercise their right to protest to do so in a manner that respects the safety of other citizens and the rule of law.

(50) … We are forced to acknowledge that by her own admission, the Catholic Church in the United States has a flawed history in the area of racial equality. Many young students of history are surprised, even shocked, to learn that Catholic institutions and religious communities “owned” human beings from west Africa as enslaved workers on their plantations. They are amazed that the Catholic Bishops did not forcefully condemn human bondage as contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is difficult for them to believe that some Catholic authors wrote tracts in defense of the slave trade and that the Church did not vigorously oppose apartheid-like Jim Crow laws in the south. …

(52) These same young students are often equally surprised at the efforts that many in the Church have made to move beyond this painful, flawed legacy. A number of Catholic priests and sisters were active in the Civil Rights Movement working and marching for racial integration in the north and south. Catholic schools in urban communities have made important educational contributions to the intellectual and moral formation of African-American youths, many of whom were not Catholics. The Church has also been at the forefront of programs that confront the sources of poverty which is a fact of life for many African-American families. In 1958, the American Bishops published “Discrimination and Christian Conscience” and in 1968 they published “National Race Crisis.” But most honest students of history would acknowledge that these documents, though well intended, were not widely disseminated or implemented. Catholic parishes and schools, north and south, remained largely segregated. And many Church practices that reinforced racial bias remained largely unchanged.

(53) Eleven years later in 1979 … two landmark pastoral letters of seminal importance appeared. The first was the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ document, “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” which bluntly condemned racism as a sin and heresy present in the Church. The second was “What We Have Seen and Heard,” the 1984 pastoral statement of the then ten African-American Catholic Bishops, who were all Auxiliary Bishops at the time. … These pivotal texts made a significant impact in certain parts of the country. However, there are parishes and dioceses where they were all but ignored. Many American Catholics today do not even know these documents exist. Reading (or rereading) these historic texts would be an excellent resource for entering the current urgently needed conversation. Here are several key excerpts.

(55) “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. In 1958, we spoke out against the blatant forms of racism that divided people through discriminatory laws and enforced segregation. We pointed out the moral evil that denied human persons their dignity as children of God and their God-given rights. A decade later in a second pastoral letter we again underscored the continuing scandal of racism and called for decisive action to eradicate it from our society. We recognize and applaud the readiness of many Americans to make new strides forward in reducing and eliminating prejudice against minorities (sic). We are convinced that the majority of Americans realize that racial discrimination is both unjust and unworthy of this nation.”

(56) “With respect to family life, we recognize that decades of denied access to opportunities have been for minority (sic) families a crushing burden. Racial discrimination has only exacerbated the harmful relationship between poverty and family instability.”

(57) “Racism is too only apparent in housing patterns in our major cities and suburbs. Witness the deterioration of inner cities and the segregation of many suburban areas by means of unjust practices of social steering and blockbusting.”

(58) “Today in our country men, women, and children are being denied opportunities for full participation and advancement in our society because of their race. The educational, legal, and financial systems, along with other structures and sectors of our society, impede people's progress and narrow their access because they are Black, Hispanic, Native American or Asian.”

(59) “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 (sic). 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.”

(60) “Discrimination belies both our civil and religious traditions. The United States of America rests on a constitutional heritage that recognizes the equality, dignity, and inalienable rights of all its citizens. Further, we are heirs of a religious teaching which proclaims that all men and women, as children of God, are brothers and sisters. Every form of discrimination against individuals and groups—whether because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, economic status, or national or cultural origin—is a serious injustice, which has severely weakened our social fabric and deprived our country of the unique contributions of many of our citizens. While cognizant of these broader concerns, we wish to draw attention here to the particular form of discrimination that is based on race.”
(61) “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.”

(62) “What We Have Seen and Heard” (1984) is a one of a kind document in which African-American Catholics spoke for the first time with a common voice when the Bishops declared:

(63) “Central to any discussion of the Black family today is the question of the Black man as husband, father, co-provider and co-protector. For many historical reasons, the Black man has been forced to bear the crushing blows of racial hate and economic repression. Too often barred from access to decent employment, too often stripped of his dignity and manhood, and too often forced into a stereotype that was a caricature of his manhood, the Black male finds himself depreciated and relegated to the margins of family life and influence.”

(64) “Black people know what freedom is because we remember the dehumanizing force of slavery, racist prejudice and oppression. No one can understand so well the meaning of the proclamation that Christ has set us free than those who have experienced the denial of freedom. For us, therefore, freedom is a cherished gift. For its preservation, no sacrifice is too great.”

(65) “Hence, freedom brings responsibility. It must never be abused, equated with license nor taken for granted. Freedom is God’s gift, and we are accountable to Him for our loss of it. And we are accountable for the gift of freedom in the lives of others. We oppose all oppression and all injustice, for unless all are free none are free. Moreover, oppression by some means freedom’s destruction for both the oppressor and the oppressed, and liberation liberates the oppressor and the oppressed.”

(66) “Our African-American ancestors knew the liberating hand of God. Even before emancipation they knew the inner spiritual freedom that comes from Jesus. Even under slavery they found ways to celebrate that spiritual freedom which God alone can give. They left us the lesson that without spiritual freedom we cannot fight for that broader freedom which is the right of all who are brothers and sisters in Christ. This is the gift we have to share with the whole Church. This is the responsibility that freedom brings: to teach others its value and work to see that its benefits are denied to none.”

(67) “On the other hand, we are in a position to counter the assumption which many have advanced that to become a Catholic is to abandon one’s racial heritage and one’s people! The Catholic Church is not a “White Church” or a “Euro-American Church.” I t is essentially universal and, hence, Catholic. The Black presence within the Catholic Church in America is a precious witness to the universal character of Catholicism.”

(68) “The historical roots of Black America and those of Catholic America are intimately intertwined. Now is the time for us who are Black Americans and Black Catholics to reclaim our roots and to shoulder the responsibilities of being both Black and Catholic. The responsibility is both to our own people and to our own Church. To the former, we owe the witness of our Faith in Christ and in His Body, the Church. To the latter, we owe this witness of faith as well as the unstinting labor to denounce racism.”

(69) Hopefully, your conversations about the Church’s past actions and statements will help you to put the current challenges we are facing in a larger historical context of Catholic teaching and actions addressing the racial divide in our land. Perhaps there is no urgent need for the Church to make more statements. The urgent need may be to live by the statements the Church has already made.

V. ARE THERE REALLY “MINORITY” AMERICANS AND “MINORITY” CATHOLICS?
(This is an expansion of the dialogue that examines the negative impact of expressions such as “minorities” and “minority groups.”)

(70) …Are there really “minority” Americans and “minority” Catholics? Though these expressions are regularly used in government and Church documents, they are radically incorrect and they exacerbate the sometimes difficult relationships between people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The reasons why these expressions are questionable become apparent after a careful consideration of what it actually means to be an American and what it means to be a Catholic. In the end, these expressions contribute to and underscore the racial divide in our country and in the Church.

(71) Beginning in the 1960s the media, the federal government, and Americans of certain racial and ethnic backgrounds (especially People of Color, Hispanics, and Asians, though significantly, not every ethnic group which constitutes a statistically small portion of the population) began to speak more and more of “minorities” and “minority groups” in solidarity with women and other groups who have experienced injustice based upon discrimination. These designations were used to help formulate the argument that, in order to redress the grave injustices caused by systemic prejudices, special consideration should be given to members of these groups in matters related to education, employment, housing, financial assistance, professional advancement and business contracts. Few fair-minded people will argue that longstanding practices of discrimination have made it impossible for certain groups of Americans to have equal access to the American dream. Without prejudice to the validity of these important concerns, the case can be made that the common use of the word “minorities” as the collective designation of these groups of people perpetuates negative stereotypes and is contradicted by what it means to be an American citizen.
In its present usage, the term “minority groups” often connotes the haves vs. the have-nots, the powerful vs. the powerless, the assimilated vs. the non-assimilated, because they have not assimilated middle-class mores and the cultural heritage of Western Europe. As a result, even when the majority of the residents in a city are African-Americans or Hispanic-Americans, they are still “minorities.”

It is obvious that the federal government, the media, the justice system, educational institutions and the Catholic Church in the United States cannot be effective in their work without being aware of the complex ethnic, racial and cultural diversity that makes up the population of this country. However, an awareness of this diversity must never lead these institutions to the uncritical acceptance or even unwitting perpetuation of terms like “minorities” and “minority groups,” which are rarely neutral and which may contradict what it means to be an American by inviting stereotypes and reinforcing prejudices.

An important step across the racial divide would be taken by acknowledging that all Americans are from different racial and ethnic backgrounds and that no group constitutes the majority. Indeed, many serious anthropological studies suggest that, in spite of their sociological prominence, ethnicity and race are very problematic categories. Frequency references to groups of Americans and groups of Catholics as “minorities” seem to designate them as who they supposedly are not. They are not a part of an arbitrary grouping of Americans of certain ethnic groups (those of European ancestry) who have been arbitrarily joined together and designated as “the majority.” Significantly, the majority of the world’s population is not of European origin and current demographic trends indicate that in the decades ahead Americans of European heritage may become a statistical “minority” of the country’s overall population.

The Catholic Church, faithful to Scripture, teaches that in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female, neither north nor south, east nor west. All are redeemed sinners transformed by Christ as members of His “mystical Body” with equal dignity before God. It would be a step in the right direction if the Catholic Church, other religious groups, and the media were to lead the way in eliminating, or at least challenging, expressions like “minorities” and “minority groups.” This is more than a matter of “political correctness.” Words, as conveyors of meaning, have great power for good or evil. Is it asking too much for a nation that proclaims itself to be “one from many” to affirm that, in truth, there are no majority/minority groups in this country because we really are one? We are simply Americans, proud of our amazingly diverse backgrounds, with every right to expect, even demand, to be treated with equal dignity by law enforcement, by the courts, in the public square and in our churches.

VI. CONCLUSION: PRAY, LISTEN, LEARN, THINK, AND ACT
(This section provides specific suggestions of activities that may help bridge the racial divide.)

We know that it is almost impossible for a family, a parish, or even a diocese to transform nationwide social structures that reinforce the racial divide. The place for us to begin is with ourselves, praying that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts to live by the words of St. Paul to the Thessalonians (5, 18-19). “Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances. Test everything; retain what is good. Refrain from every kind of evil.”

Therefore, I will conclude this Reflection with suggestions for your consideration. …

• Go to Mass and Communion at least one weekday a week and pray specifically for guidance concerning ways in which you can bridge the racial divide.
• Read the Sacred Scriptures regularly focusing on the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of St. Paul. Meditate on passages that remind you that in Christ, God reveals His love for every human being.
• Take up Brothers and Sisters to Us (1979) and What We Have Seen and Heard (1984). Study these key documents and learn about important examples in the Church’s teaching on the racial divide in America. There are valuable, unhesited suggestions in each letter that are relevant for today. Examine the expression, “White privilege.” What does it mean to you? Does consideration of this idea diminish or increase the racial divide?
• Become involved with any community activities that support and strengthen families. Direct your children to proper role-models who will help them lead mature, responsible, Christ-centered lives.

Are there things you can do, as a faithful Christian, that can bridge the different experiences and attitudes that cause the racial divide?