

# Many Faces in God's House

## The Issue: Racism in the US

The question of race continues to divide our society. Studies show that people in the US have widely divergent views on whether a problem even exists: most African Americans see racism as a problem getting worse, while the majority of white Americans see racism as disappearing and as no longer a significant problem.

Racism is often invisible and unconscious to the majority:

- They suffer less from it
- They don't attribute their misfortune to race
- They don't always see the suffering that people of "other" color endure

"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. 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." (*U.S. Bishops, Brothers & Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day, 1979*)

## Origins of racism:

- Colonization and Slavery
- 1830: Indian Removal Act
- 1935: Social Security Act, except for farm hands and domestics, then mostly African American
- 1940-50: refusal of the Federal Housing Administration to grant loans to integrated neighborhoods, thus excluding most African Americans from the possibility to buy their home and buy wealth to pass on the next generation.

## The fight against racism:

- 1955–1968: African-American Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- 1962: Creation of the United Farm Workers movement led by Cesar Chavez
- 1968: Creation of the American Indian Movement led by Russell Means

Prejudice, discrimination, negative stereotyping and racial profiling are some expressions of racism.

There are three levels of racism today: individual, institutional and cultural.

## Race disparities

	White	African American	Hispanic
Unemployment (2009)	6.4 %	11.7 %	7.5 %
Home ownership (2008)	71.7 %	47.4 %	49.1 %
Median hr wages (2007)	\$18.75	\$13.47	\$12.2
Poverty rate (2006-08)	10.5 %	24.7 %	21.2 %
Children poverty rate (2005)	10 %	33 %	28 %

(From [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov))

Racial disparities exist in housing, education, health, employment, justice and wealth.

**"We are one human family." (Pope John Paul II)**

“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. . . . . Racial discrimination has only exacerbated the harmful relationship between poverty and family instability. . . . Racism is only too apparent in housing patterns in our major cities and suburbs. Witness the deterioration of inner cities and the segregation of many suburban areas. . . . . Racism is apparent when we note that the population in our prisons consists disproportionately of minorities; that violent crime is the daily companion of a life of poverty and deprivation; that the victims of such crimes are also disproportionately nonwhite and poor. Racism is also apparent in the attitudes and behavior of some law enforcement officials and in the unequal availability of legal assistance. . . . . Racism is sometimes apparent in the growing sentiment that too much is being given to racial minorities by way of affirmative action programs or allocations to redress long-standing imbalances in minority representation and government-funded programs for the disadvantaged.” (*U.S. Bishops, Brothers & Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day, 1979*)

Racial disparities show that people who are from a different race or ethnicity than whites are disadvantaged. More recently was introduced a corollary: whites do benefit from racism. This new concept is called “White privilege”. It refers to the reality that in the U.S. society “there are opportunities which are afforded to whites that people of color simply do not share.” (*Poverty & Racism, Catholic Charities, USA, 2008*)

Poverty and racism are so intertwined that it is impossible to fully separate them. Racism, in both its individual and institutional forms, is a cause of poverty and at the same time an additional barrier for people of color seeking to escape poverty.” (*Poverty & Racism, Catholic Charities, USA, 2008*)

## **Why do We Care**

Poverty and racial injustice are moral scandals that betray our national ideals of “liberty and justice for all.” (*Poverty & Racism, Catholic Charities, USA, 2008*)

## **What our Faith tells us**

### 7 Key themes of Catholic Social Teaching

The Church’s social teaching offers us guidance about building a just society and living lives of holiness amidst the challenges of modern society. They are highlighted in seven key themes and several of these especially apply to the issue of racism:

1. *Life and Dignity of the Human Person*: Belief in the inherent dignity of the human person is the foundation of all Catholic social teaching. Human life is sacred, and the dignity of the human person is the starting point for a moral vision for society. This principle is grounded in the idea that the person is made in the image of God. The person is the clearest reflection of God among us.
2. *Call to Family, Community, and Participation*
3. *Rights and Responsibilities*: Human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met. Every person has a fundamental right to life and a right to those things required for human decency – starting with food, shelter and clothing, employment, health care, and education. Corresponding to these rights are duties and responsibilities -- to one another, to our families, and to the larger society.
4. *Option for the Poor and Vulnerable*
5. *The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers*: The moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable members. The poor have the most urgent moral claim on the conscience of the nation. We are called to look at public policy decisions in terms of how they affect the poor. The "option for

the poor," is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community.

6. *Solidarity*

7. *Care for God's Creation*

### **What can You do**

"Responding to the sin of racism must begin with each of us examining our own selves on this subject. We need to be open to a change of heart. We should ask God's Spirit to remove from us all traces of racial prejudice. We should avoid racial stereotypes, slurs and jokes. We should correct any expressions or racist attitudes among family members, friends, and co-workers. We should seek opportunities to know and learn from people of other races. Resisting racism also means examining our basic instincts and assumptions about race. How do these assumptions shape our daily lives? (*In God's Image; A Pastoral Letter on Racism, Archbishop Harry Flynn, St. Paul/Minneapolis, 2003*)

*PRAY* for an end to racism.

*LEARN* more about racism by reading books on its history and lingering effects.

*REACH* across boundaries of religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and disabling conditions.

*TAKE* a personal inventory of your own heart and discover what has to change.

*REFUSE* to use biased language and to tell jokes tinged with racist attitudes.

*ENCOURAGE* others to do the same.

*SERVE* those who are poor and vulnerable, sharing more time and talent.

*GIVE* more generously to those in need.

*ADVOCATE* for public policies that promote racial justice:

In Housing: improving fair housing laws and increasing funding for affordable housing

In Health: improving access to health care

In Justice: reforming the criminal justice system

For Social safety net: strengthening social programs

In Education: improving quality educational opportunities for all and access to technology

In Employment: upholding some affirmative action policies

In Immigration: having a comprehensive reform of the law

### **References for further reading**

*Websites:*

[www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1991](http://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=1991) (Racial Equality and Diversity Initiatives)

[www.paxchristiusa.org/pc\\_brothers\\_sisters.asp](http://www.paxchristiusa.org/pc_brothers_sisters.asp) (The Pax Christi USA Anti-Racism Initiative)

*Books:*

"The Help" by Kathryn Sockett, 2009: a novel set in Jackson, Mississippi in 1962 during the civil rights movement; this book explores what happens when boundaries are broken and racial lines are crossed.

"To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee, 1960: a novel set in Alabama, during the Depression; this book explores Civil Rights and racism in the segregated southern US of the 30s through the eyes of an 8-year old girl.

## Local volunteer opportunities:

*St. Vincent de Paul Society:* Volunteers are needed to do home visits or help at the food pantry (svdpvolunteers@verizon.net). Volunteers are also needed to sort and price donations at *St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store* (300 N. Main in Bryan, 979-823-4369).

*Good Samaritan Gabriel Life Center:* Volunteers are needed to sort and organize donations, for administrative tasks and watch children while their parents attend classes (1314 E 29th St. in Bryan, 979-822-9340).

*Twin City Mission:* Volunteers are needed at the soup kitchen (volunteer@twincitymission.org).

*Habitat for Humanity:* Volunteers are needed on the construction site, at the Habitat ReStore, in the office and as Spanish translators (979-823-7200, volunteer@habitatbcs.org).

## Prayers

### *The Beatitudes*

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Give us the spirit of poverty and humbleness.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Make us compassionate to others.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Teach us to share the tears of our brothers and sisters.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied." Give us souls who are thirsty for love and justice.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Open our hearts to love our brothers and sisters.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." Enlighten our eyes with your grace and truth.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." Make us your instruments of peace and justice.

Lord Jesus, you said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Make us willing to denounce rather than practice injustice; and do not let us discriminate against our neighbors.

### *Prayer for a Diverse Community (from Education for Justice)*

Creator of all races and ethnicities, help us see that a diverse community is the way to deepen our lives and to know you more deeply.

Guide us to see that entering into a vital and just relationship with others who are different from us is the way to make ourselves whole.

Guard us from fear of the other, from the fear that our own security is threatened if we become truly willing to make a place at the table for all.

Open us to live out what we profess to believe:

That our true security is in You and in your call to justice and peace,

That we are a part of your global family,

That, because of your Incarnation, the human dignity of everyone is sacred,

And that we are constantly called to conversion and inclusive community.

We pray that you help us recognize any forms of racism in our hearts,

And in our legal systems and social structures.

Forgive us our sins of exclusion.

Heal our souls and spirits.

Ground us in compassion for all through your grace.

Help us take the steps you call us to take

To build a more just community,

Where difference is respected

And where we can all join hands

And rejoice in the common good.

Through the mercy of God, we pray. Amen.