

Catholic Social Thought and Racism

By Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

“... racism is not merely one sin among many, it is a radical evil dividing the human family ...”

- United States Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, 39

The Moral Judgment on Racism

Consideration of racism is grounded in fundamental scriptural beliefs: equal dignity of all people, created in God’s image; and Christ’s redemption of all.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church spells this out: 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.”¹

Moral judgments on racism, based on equality, are consistent: “any theory or form whatsoever of racism and racial discrimination is morally unacceptable”;² and “racism is not merely one sin among many, it is a radical evil dividing the human family...”³

Jesus tells the Good Samaritan story— one of his three “great parables”⁴—to answer “Who is my neighbor?” His response addresses entrenched divisions between Jew and Samaritan and sets the stage for the unity of “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). This unity admits “no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex...”⁵



The Moral Judgment on Racism

Catholic teaching “emphasizes not only the individual conscience, but also the political, legal and economic structures...”⁶ Racism is about people and about group behaviors and societal organization. Individual racism includes conscious acts, spontaneous attitudes, “the tendency to stereotype and marginalize,”⁷ indifference, and “the triumph of private concern over public responsibility...”⁸



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Laws such as U.S. segregation or South Africa's apartheid⁹ represent blatant systemic racism. More subtle racism treats groups as "second-class citizens with regard, for instance, to higher education, to housing, to employment and especially to public... services..."¹⁰ Even more subtle racism is now masked in appeals to equality that guarantee that past inequalities are perpetuated by blocking corrective efforts. "At times protestations claiming that all persons should be treated equally reflect the desire to maintain a status quo that favors one race and social group at the expense of the poor and non-white."¹¹ Social, economic, educational, and political advantages from the past are cemented as the often-unconscious privilege of the present. Thus, "Racism obscures the evils of the past and denies the burdens" that history imposes on people of color today.¹²

Pope John Paul II maintained a four-fold personal responsibility for social evils:

"... the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate, or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear, or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world; and also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order."¹³

Thus, we can be involved in societal racism as: 1) supporters or exploiters; 2) accessories through complicity or indifference; 3) accessories through fatalistic acceptance; and 4) accessories through consecration of the status quo.

Responses to Racism

Personally, we are called to conversion—to respect the rights, dignity, equality, and sanctity of racially different individuals and groups. "This does not mean erasing cultural differences," but "...a positive appreciation of the complementary diversity of peoples"¹⁴ and the distinct contributions of racial minorities to "the internal strength of our nation."¹⁵ Moreover, the tradition emphasizes "respect for foreigners, acceptance of dialogue, sharing, mutual aid, and collaboration with other ethnic groups."¹⁶

Systemically, we must unmask social evil and, like prophets, denounce injustice. We must eradicate overt and covert racism. This requires solidarity with those suffering from disadvantages woven into society and our self-perceptions. For John Paul II, this solidarity is "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people...On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good..."¹⁷

Our interdependence globally implies a moral responsibility for human development; this, Pope Benedict writes, "depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side."¹⁸ For those who benefit from the express and hidden advantages of racial inequities—still continuing—the Church urges honesty about the past and present so that everyone's future will be different. "An honest look at the past makes plain the need for restitution wherever possible— makes evident the justice of restoration and redistribution."¹⁹



STOP RACISM

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why is racism a rejection of the human dignity of a group of people? Why is it so difficult for many people to recognize the human dignity of a group of people different than their own ethnic group and culture? Where do we see this lack of vision in our country and our world today?
2. Why do you think the Church not only considers racism as a sin, but as a radical evil? What does racism and hatred of “the other” do to families, communities, nations, and the global human family?
3. Fr. Kammer discusses the many faces of racism, which include not only individual acts of intolerance and discrimination, but also group behavior and “the political, legal and economic structures” that institutionalize discrimination. What examples does Fr. Kammer give of these different faces of racism? What are other examples of individual, group, and structured racism, especially in terms of recent events?
4. Fr. Kammer quotes the U.S. Catholic Bishops on the “burdens of history” that still impact people of color today. Where do we still see the legacy of centuries of slavery, segregation, hatred, intolerance, and discrimination, especially in the news this past year? This is often difficult for some parts of the population to accept; why is so difficult for some to understand why often violent discrimination has left burdens and legacies that still have an impact on many communities and individuals?
5. Pope John Paul II declared we can participate in social evil as 1) supporters or exploiters of racism; 2) accessories through complicity or indifference; 3) accessories through fatalistic acceptance; and 4) accessories through acceptance and consecration of the status quo. Can you give specific examples of each of these? Why is being passive and accepting of racism as “the way it is” unacceptable to Pope John Paul?
6. Fr. Kammer reminds us that we are continually called to conversion, and to respond to racism as individuals and as part of our faith communities and local and national groups. What are some examples of responses to racism on the part of individuals? What are some responses that have come from faith communities, from national organizations, and from local and national governments in terms of systems and structures?

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PRAYER

Lord of All, we pray that you heal the wounds of racism in our communities, our country, and our world.

There has been too much fear of the other, too much violence, and too little recognition that we are all created in Your image, each with human dignity.

We pray for conversion of hearts, for peace in our hearts, and peace among all your children.

We celebrate the diversity that You have created.



Give us the grace to continue the work of building a “beloved community” where we can all join hands for the common good. Amen.

FAITH IN ACTION

1. Learn more about Pax Christi USA, the Catholic peace organization and its work on anti-racism: <http://paxchristiusa.org/>.
2. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has a list of 50 ideas for celebrating the contributions of African Americans and anti-racism activities: <http://bit.ly/1RH2Tku>.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1994), No. 1935, quoting Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 29.
- 2 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, No. 433.
- 3 United States Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, 1979, No. 39.
- 4 Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, No. 15. original.
- 5 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 32.
- 6 U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, No. 259.
- 7 *Brothers and Sisters*, No. 22.
- 8 *Ibid.*, no. 250, emphasis added.
- 9 *Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Racism Toward a More Fraternal Society*, 1989, No. 9.
- 10 *Ibid.*, No. 11.
- 11 *Brothers and Sisters*, No. 18.
- 12 *Ibid.*, No. 19.
13. Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, No. 16.
14. *The Church and Racism*, No. 33.
15. *Brothers and Sisters*, No. 21.
16. *The Church and Racism*, No. 25.
17. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1989, No. 38
18. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, No. 53.
19. *Brothers and Sisters*, No. 19.

