

in a

Word™

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There is no place for racism in the hearts of any person: it is a perversion of the Lord's will for men and women, all of whom were made in God's image and likeness.

*-from OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS
Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism*

A PRIESTLY FRIEND

by Selika Sweet, M.D. FAAFP

I was 17 years of age when I arrived at the Crescent City home of the New Orleans Saints. My mother, father, sister and brother all attended Tougaloo College near our hometown of Jackson, Mississippi. Being eighth generation Mississippi, I felt I wanted to start anew in a different land, people and culture.

I attended Dillard University in New Orleans, Louisiana. The college is beautiful with oak trees, white buildings and loving people who speak English sprinkled with French words. I attended church on Sunday mornings in the back of Lawless Memorial Chapel. I had never been to a mass like this. Father Jerome LeDoux had made the song *We Shall Overcome* into a Catholic hymn. We would all hold hands while he sang the loudest. There he was, a light brown-skinned man with the biggest smile. After church, there was a table full of breads like banana and juices for the on average 10 attendees.

I decided to join the drama department my freshman year. We were cleaning out the building, and I stepped on a nail. I hopped from the back of the campus through the avenue of the oaks about half a mile to the bus stop on Gentilly Boulevard and got the bus to Dillard's Hospital Flint Goodridge. "How are you getting home?" the doctor asked me after treating me with Betadine soaks and a tetanus shot. You should not have caught the bus here and _"

"I don't know. The only person I know with a vehicle is the priest from church."

I called Father LeDoux, and within 30 minutes he came and got me. He drove me back to the campus.

"Thanks for coming," I told my priest friend.

"No problem. Here, put your arm on my shoulder. I'll help you to the dormitory."

My junior year of college, Father was transferred to St. Martin de Porres in Prairie View, Texas. Dillard University is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ. No other Catholic priest came to serve our small congregation.

I would graduate from college and went off to Mehary Medical College. I returned to New Orleans for residency at Alton Ochsner Medical Hospital. I found Father LeDoux at Saint Augustine Catholic Church on Governor Nicholls Street in Treme'. I hadn't seen him since my college days. The church is the oldest African-American Catholic church in New Orleans. The church was dedicated in 1842, and free people of color and white attended. The church is known for **The War of the Pews** where people of color began to purchase pews for their families to sit. The white people in the church started a campaign to buy more pews than the freed people of color. The War of the Pews began and was won by the free people of color who bought three pews to everyone purchased by whites. The mix of pews resulted in the most integrated congregation in the United States.

My life like most people became busy and it would be years since I had seen or talked with one of my best friends. I would read *Reflections of Life* for guidance for myself and two children. I went to a revival at Holy Ghost Catholic Church he had and sent him an occasional message of hello.

Father LeDoux sent out a message to his e-mail group that he was having coronary bypass surgery.

November 17, 2018

Hello Father LeDoux:

Hope all is well. I am thinking about you. Anything I can do? I would love to see you.

Selika

He responded:

November 18, 2018 19:97 a.m.

Hi, Selika!

Yes, things are going reasonable well. Thanks for your prayers and good wishes. I would love to see you too. I am at Holy Ghost Church 747 N. Union St. Opelousas, Louisiana. God bless you.

December 15, 2018 11:45 a.m.

Dear Father LeDoux:

I am in the Lafayette area looking for you. Have you had surgery? Will you do mass tomorrow? I want to see you this weekend. Love you!

I received no response from my e-mail. It was the first time in 40 years. I passed Lafayette and returned to metro Jackson area. I kept thinking. 'I've got to get back to Bayou country and check on him.' My work as a family physician is time-consuming. I have the responsibilities of providing care for thousands of people not to mention rounding on the ones in the hospital.

I was at work late evening around 11 p.m. about 3 weeks later that I was sent a message that Father LeDoux had passed from complications of heart surgery. The guilt hit that I had not seen him.

I drove to Opelousas to Holy Ghost Catholic Church. There were 2,000 people plus and the prettiest ceremony. The mass ended with the song "WE SHALL OVERCOME." I drove home thinking 'I want more.' The next night I went to the prayer service in Bay St. Louis Mississippi at Saint Augustine Seminary. The dignitaries from New Orleans were there, the family, friends, the church was packed.

The funeral mass was the next day. I did not attend because of work. I realized work could have waited. The Saint Augustine Parish in Treme' had a memorial a few weeks later I attended with more dignitaries, family and friends. I heard the drums and smelled the incense as I entered the big white church with about 1,000 people.

I have been to the gravesite of my old friend and after looking at his tombstone wandered to the chapel where he started at 13 years of age. I have lost the physical Father Jerome LeDoux. I have found a Seminary of love at Saint Augustine.

"God is love, and all who abide in love abide in God and God in them." (1 John 4:16)

Dr. Selika Sweet is a family physician in Jackson, Mississippi. We thank Dr. Sweet for sharing during this Black History month her experience of the charismatic Fr. Jerome LeDoux, SVD



+ Father Jerome LeDoux, SVD

Recommitting to racial justice has not gone out of season

By Mark Pattison Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Catholic groups and organizations are striving to not only acknowledge the sins of the past but also do something to atone for them.

Network, a Catholic social justice lobby, issued a Lenten study guide last year, "Recommit to Racial Justice." It has proved so popular that more copies of the six-week program need to be made whenever Network participates in conferences, according to Meg Olson, who leads Network's grassroots mobilization team.

They fairly flew off the table at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington in January, and Olson said, "I'm printing several hundred copies to take to L.A. for the Religious Education Congress," an annual event that draws thousands of participants each year.

The response to "Recommit to Racial Justice" was enlightening, Olson told Catholic News Service. "Last year,

especially, with the talk of racial justice, we had people accessing (it) who knew nothing about Network," she said. The U.S. bishops had recently approved a new statement, "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love -- A Pastoral Letter Against Racism," which called racism a sin.

But "Recommit to Racial Justice" isn't just for Lent anymore. Like previous Network Lenten study guides, "we evergreen them as soon as Easter arrives so people can use them all year-round," Olson said.

Network, though, need not rely solely on anecdotes to measure a Lenten's program efficacy. The design of "Recommit to Racial Justice" also followed the pattern of its previous Lenten study guides.

"What we typically do is give them a chapter a week and give them an action word. Like last year, action alerts were matching up really well with the racial justice content," Olson told CNS. "The week of the immigration chapter was the one for the DREAM Act" House vote action alert.

"We are able to track just through our emails -- after the 3,000 people have signed up -- who's opening their email, who's downloading the chapter, who's taking action," Olson said.

Some Catholic institutions have recognized their own culpability on racial matters in recent years and taken steps to right wrongs.

Georgetown University in Washington acknowledged its history of slaveholding in 2016. The Jesuit school had sold 272 slaves in 1838 to keep the school from closing. Georgetown was paid \$115,000, the equivalent of \$3.3 million in 2020 dollars.

Georgetown committed to raise \$400,000 a year to distribute to the 8,000-plus known descendants of the slaves -- known as "The GU 272," although descendants said last

year the number of known slaves once held by Georgetown is expected to top 300.

If there were exactly 8,000 descendants and each got an equal payment from the \$400,000 fundraising target, that would come to \$50 per person per year. According to a New York Times op-ed essay by three of the descendants posted Feb. 6, the university has an endowment of about \$1.6 billion.

After Georgetown's history of slaveholding was made public, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart conducted research into its own history. It was generally believed the order owned slaves, although details were sketchy, according to Sacred Heart Sister Irma Dillard, a member of the order's Slavery, Accountability and Reconciliation Committee.

"We knew we were involved, like everybody else in the country, in slavery, because that was what it was," Sister Dillard told CNS in a phone interview from San Francisco. The research first zeroed in on the order's oldest continuously operating school, founded in 1821, in

Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

It turned out that the woman who "gave us the land and the first house -- she was a widow -- she had about 25 enslaved with her, so that's how we started, with her enslaved people," Sister Dillard said. A private girls-school education was costly. "When they finally started taking students, there were people who were rich in land but not in cash," she added. "You bring a student, and they would bring one or two of their enslaved to offset the cost of tuition." Also, Sister Dillard said, "we ended up buying a few here and there."

At the nearby parish, "the did not want the black folks to go to hell, so they baptized and evangelized. They taught the catechism to the slaves," she said. Parish sacramental records and handwritten journals kept by the nuns at that time led to the ultimate discovery of about 150 who had been enslaved.

Unlike at Georgetown, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart decided to "talk to the descendants first" before figuring out how to address the slavery issue, Sister Dillard told CNS. Some of their requests: "They want a memorial. They wanted as much information as we could give them. Then they asked to have a gathering at Grand Coteau," which took place in September 2018. There, they asked further for headstones and a plaque on the old slave quarters that still stands on the academy's property.

Both the order, corporately, and Sister Dillard, individually, are still at work on the subject. The order offers a scholarship to an African American girl to attend the Grand Coteau school, and Sister Dillard lends her voice to equality issues from California.

After all, "there's 40 million-plus people in slavery today," she said. "Slavery's all about money."



in a word or two



Musicians from St. Finbar Parish in Brooklyn, N.Y., play the marimba during a special Mass in honor of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala, Jan. 5, 2020, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Housed in the Basilica of Esquipulas, the 16th-century cedar sculpture of Jesus is a popular object of veneration by Central Americans. The crucifix is also the focal point of a major festival held annually on Jan. 15 that attracts thousands of pilgrims. (CNS photos/Gregory A. Shemitz)



Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini Imeri of Huehuetenango, Guatemala, delivers his homily at special Mass

A replica of the Black Christ of Esquipulas, Guatemala

Worshippers at Mass in honor of the Black Christ



Some passages from OPEN WIDE YOUR HEARTS that deserve attention

“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.”

“Consistently, African Americans have been branded, by individuals, society, and even, at times, by members of the Church, with the message that they are inferior. Likewise, this message has been imprinted into the U.S. social subconscious. African Americans continue to struggle against perceptions that they do not fully bear the image of God, that they embody less intelligence, beauty, and goodness. This reality represents more than a few isolated stories; it was the lived experience of the vast majority of African Americans for most of our national history.”

“As in all things, we turn to prayer, asking Our Blessed Mother to intercede on our behalf:

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.”

Divine Word Missionaries is an international missionary community of over 7,000 brothers and priests. In 1905 the SVDs began working among African Americans in the Southern United States. Today, Divine Word Missionaries work in over 35 parishes in Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Florida and Arkansas. IN A WORD is a publication of The Society of the Divine Word's Media Production Center. Rev. James Pawlicki, S.V.D., Director and Editor; Cathy Green-Miner, office manager; consultant.

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