

in a

WordTM

A Publication of The Society of the Divine Word, Southern Province

Volume 38 No. 4 April 2019



**Open wide our hearts
The enduring call to love
U.S. Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism**

Photo by Father Andreas Kedati, SVD

Open wide our hearts

The enduring call to love

U.S. Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism

(In November of 2018 The National Council of Bishops published a deep look at Racism in the United States. In this issue we present the beginning words of that document)



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.

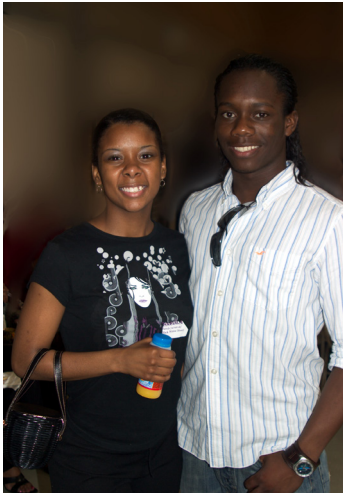
All too often, Hispanics and African Americans, for example, face discrimination in hiring, housing, educational opportunities, and incarceration. Racial profiling frequently targets Hispanics for selective immigration enforcement practices, and African Americans, for suspected criminal activity. There 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.



in a word or two



Notre Dame University announces that Norman C. Francis, longtime beloved president of Xavier University of Louisiana, will receive the University of Notre Dame's 2019 [Laetare Medal](#) — the oldest and most prestigious honor given to American Catholics — at Notre Dame's 174th University [Commencement Ceremony](#) on May 19 (Sunday).

"For more than 50 years, Dr. Francis has been at the center of civil rights advocacy by leveraging the power of Catholic higher education," said Notre Dame President [Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.](#) "In bestowing the Laetare Medal upon him, Notre Dame recognizes his leadership in the fight for social justice through educational empowerment."

During Francis' 47-year tenure as president, Xavier's enrollment nearly tripled, the endowment grew eightfold and the university became the leading producer of African-American undergraduates who complete medical school. Xavier also ranks first nationally in the number of African-American students earning undergraduate degrees in biology and life sciences, chemistry, physics and pharmacy.

At a time when the U.S. Supreme Court — based on a legal challenge to Louisiana law regarding "separate but equal" — upheld segregation as the law of the land, St. Katharine Drexel founded Xavier, America's only historically black and Catholic university, in 1925. Heir to a banking fortune, Drexel also founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and used her entire inheritance to advance racial equality for African-Americans and Native Americans, especially through education. Drexel's influence permeates Francis' achievements.

"I did not build Xavier; I was part of Katharine Drexel's mission to provide a quality education for all," Francis said. "All the people I worked with were part of this plan and mission, which was not only honorable, but was totally necessary when you look back at what the United States was at the time."

Born in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1931, Francis was one of five children, and his early education took place in Catholic schools

run by Spiritan priests and Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament — all funded by Drexel's philanthropy during a time when American Catholic churches were segregated.

In 1952, Francis became the first African-American admitted to Loyola University Law School in New Orleans. As he put it, "Somebody had to break the color line." Francis was not the only member of his family to push color lines. His older brother, the Most Reverend Joseph Francis, auxiliary bishop of Newark, became the fourth African-American to be elevated to the bishopric in the United States.

After earning his law degree, Francis served in the U.S. Army, after which he decided to forgo a promising legal practice for a career in higher education and became dean of men at Xavier in 1957.

"It didn't take long for me to see that I could do more good educating young African-Americans, and when I look at the stats and where we are nationally, I never regretted it," Francis said. Francis accepted the offer to become the first lay African-American president of Xavier on April 4, 1968 — the same day Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

"I am honored by Notre Dame recognizing me in this way," Francis said. "I think the fact that I have the privilege of being among the Laetare awardees is itself a hope and an inspiration, not just for the students, but for many others as well."

While solidifying Xavier's reputation of academic excellence, Francis gained renown as a civic leader and an exceptional statesman. He served in advisory roles to eight U.S. presidents on education and civil rights issues and has served on 54 boards and commissions. He has been a member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, a member of the Board of Trustees at the Catholic University of America and a member of the board of directors of the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice. He also served as chair of the Louisiana Recovery Authority after Hurricane Katrina. In 2006, President George W. Bush honored Francis with the nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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.

Correspondence to Media Production Center, 199 Seminary Drive, Bay St. Louis, MS 39520, Phone: 228-344-3166.

Electronic messages to our inawordsvd@gmail.com. IN A WORD is not published during July and August.

Web page can be found at <http://www.inaword.com>