What Has the Church Said About Racism?

by BJ Brown

“Beware,” I was taught, “when you hear the words ‘as the Church has always and everywhere taught.’ It is a sure sign that you are about to hear something you’ve never heard before.”

For more than half a century, Catholic bishops in the United States have denounced racism. For many US Catholics, however, it is something that they’ve never heard before. As our country is called to acknowledge the persistent, insidious, widespread racism that touches all our lives, it may help to recover what the US bishops have tried to teach since their 1958 statement on Discrimination and the Christian Conscience, in their 1979 pastoral letter Brothers and Sisters to Us and in their 2018 pastoral letter Open Wide Our Hearts.

What the Administrative Board of the National Catholic Welfare Conference wrote in 1958 sounds as if it could be lifted from today’s editorial pages:

_It appears that in recent years the issues have become confused and the march toward justice and equality has been slowed if not halted in some areas. The transcendent moral issues involved have been obscured and possibly forgotten._

(The NCWC was a predecessor of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops). The transcendent moral issue the bishops had in mind was the “full rights” that are given by God our creator to every human person. Their language is straightforward:

_No one who bears the name Christian can deny the universal love of God for all [hu]mankind. . .our Christian faith is universal. It knows not the distinctions of race, color or nationhood._

The statement goes on to point out that “among the tragedies of racial oppression” is the way it self-perpetuates through inequalities in education, employment, housing and health. Long before the language of social justice and social sin became common parlance in the Catholic church, the US bishops pointed toward the structural manifestations of the evil of racism.

The 1979 pastoral letter, Brothers and Sisters to Us, was written in response to A Call to Action, a national Catholic consultation on social justice that was held as part of the US bicentennial. The pastoral letter’s language, like its 1958 predecessor’s, is blunt. The very first sentence begins “Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our church.” The first paragraph concludes that “racial discrimination is both unjust and unworthy of this nation.” Developing their earlier recognition that racism and economic inequality are interrelated, Brothers and Sister to Us asserts that unresolved racism permeates both social structures and individual hearts in subtle and dangerous ways that

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are easy to ignore and hard to eradicate. Nonetheless, the church must not remain silent: the pastoral letter calls all Catholics to acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past, reminding us that “the absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility” to resist and uproot these sins. Concluding with the same direct language with which it began, the pastoral letter name racism as a “terrible sin [that] defiles the image of God . . .mocks the cross of Christ [and] ridicules the incarnation.”

Five years later, in 1984, ten US Black Catholic bishops published a pastoral letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*. The bishops wished to “share the gift of our Blackness with the Church in the United States,” to make that experience part of the common heritage shared throughout the universal church. In the letter, the bishops denounced the sin of racism and stated their opposition to all injustice, “for unless all are free, none are free.” But the primary focus of the pastoral letter was evangelization, and the unique contributions of African-Americans to that work. The bishops wrote “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.”

Nearly thirty years later, US bishops again addressed “the particularly destructive and persistent form of evil” that is racism in their 2018 pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts*. Once again, the bishops condemn the sin of racism, calling it “totally incompatible with the universal call to salvation in Jesus Christ” and a “perversion of the Lord’s will for women and men, all of whom were made in God’s image and likeness.” In this pastoral letter, the bishops reflect at greater length on the complexities of racism, on how it is expressed in attitudes, in symbolic actions, in individual acts of discrimination and in systemic injustice in ways that “make us all accomplices in racism.” *Open Wide Our Hearts* also commits the US bishops to a program of action leading to “a transformation of the human heart that impels us to action.” The strategies proposed for individuals and institutions include acknowledging sins of commission and omission, education and openness to others’ experiences, forging new relationships and working for justice in the church and in society. The pastoral letter concludes with the unequivocal statement that “racism is a life issue,” thus placing it among the highest priorities for the US Catholic church’s social mission.

Woven throughout these decades of church teaching are the Church’s central beliefs: that we are all created in God’s image and likeness; that we are all God’s people, a human community with mutual obligations; and that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ redeems us all and calls all of us to a fullness of life.

So yes, it is true that the Catholic Church has always and everywhere taught the fundamental truths that should make it inescapably clear to us that every form of racism is to be uprooted from human hearts and human lives. It is also true that ours is an *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a human community always in need of repentance and reform. The history of the Catholic Church in the US also includes support of colonialism, ownership of enslaved people and segregated parishes and schools. The church must always ask itself why it hasn’t lived up to its own teaching and how it can come closer to living the gospel that it proclaims.

The extra-judicial deaths of unarmed Black women, men and children, the disproportionate incidences of COVID-19 along racial lines, exclusionary immigration policies, the persistence of poverty and inequalities in wealth are all undeniable signs of our times. It is up to us to read them in light of the gospel and in light of what the church has tried to teach. Now, it is again our responsibility to make sure that our transcendent moral responsibilities are not obscured or forgotten, and so renew our progress toward equality and justice for all.

*The full texts of* *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, *What We Have Seen and Heard* and *Open Wide Our Hearts* can be found at usccb.org. A Catholic newspaper’s reprint of the text of *Discrimination and the Christian Conscience* can be searched online.

*Image: Rene Fisher on Unsplash.*
**Parish Conversation on Race**

Join us on **Monday, July 13 at 7:30 PM** for *A Parish Conversation on Race*. We will meet via Zoom; please sign up at https://bit.ly/38Ejxir to receive a link to the meeting on Monday.

We invite all participants to look at some of the following resources before the conversation. Links can be found on the home page of oldstjoseph.org.

- The late Bishop George Murray SJ’s 2018 talk at the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies (Bishop Murray speaks for the first half hour; the balance of the video is question and answer).
- Fr. Bryan Massingale’s June 2020 article for *National Catholic Reporter* “The Assumptions of White Privilege and What We Can Do About It”.

Additional resources for prayer and reflection are available at these websites: Ignatian Solidarity Network, Pax Christi USA, Dr. Tia Noelle Pratt’s #BlackCatholicsSyllabus and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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**Requiescat in Pace**

It is with deep sadness that we announce the passing of Old St. Joseph's former business manager Patricia DiLauro. Pat passed away on July 4th after a lengthy illness. Hired in 1987 as pastoral assistant to Fr. Bill Watters, Pat was quickly promoted to the position of business manager. She was instrumental during the founding years of our outreach to the Gesu School. Over her many years at OSJ, numerous parishioners came to Pat for spiritual direction. She retired from full-time employment in 2013 but continued as part-time bookkeeper for the Jesuit Community through 2017. Pat was known by many as a deeply spiritual and kind woman with a wonderfully dry sense of humor. Pat is survived by her sister Maria Curry. Due to COVID-19, Pat’s memorial service will take place at a later date. Please keep Pat’s sister Maria in your thoughts and prayers.

*Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon her; may her soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*

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Please remember our sick and homebound brothers and sisters, our ministry at Pennsylvania Hospital and all those who have asked for our prayers.

*George Bernato, Debbie Brooks, Ann Crowther, Jane Crowther, Mary Kay Crowther, Barbara Epting, Allan May, Jerry McAndrews SJ, Owen Petzelka, Philip Press, Matthew Smith, Sara Smith, Sharon Winge and Pat Yusko.*

*If you wish to have someone included on the parish prayer list, please call BJ Brown at 215-923-1733 or email bjbrown@oldstjoseph.org.*
INFORMATION

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Director of Hospital Ministry
Tom Volkert (hospitalEM@oldstjoseph.org)

Rectory Office Hours
Monday through Friday: 9:30 AM to 4:30 PM

Mass Times
Monday–Friday at 12:05 PM.
Live-streamed at 9:30 AM Sunday; at vimeo.com/osjphl.
Public Mass at 11:30 AM Sunday.

Medical Emergency
In a medical emergency when the need for a priest is urgent, please call the rectory.

Hearing Enhancements
Old St. Joseph’s is equipped with an audio hearing loop. Switch on the T-coil function of your device to use the loop. Booklets with the Sunday readings are available in the rear of the church.

Registration
Registration forms are available in the rectory office during normal office hours, on the bookcases in the back of the church and online at www.oldstjoseph.org. They can be returned to the parish office by mail or in person.

Sacrament of Reconciliation
Priests are available for the Sacrament of Reconciliation Monday through Saturday by appointment; please call the parish offices.

Sacrament of Baptism
To arrange a baptism, please contact Fr. Hannafey (fhannafey@oldstjoseph.org) at least two months before the desired date.

Eucharist for the Homebound
To arrange to receive Communion at home, please contact the parish offices.

The Sacrament of Anointing
Homebound or hospitalized persons wanting to receive the Sacrament of Anointing should call the parish office.

Sacrament of Matrimony
If you want to be married at Old St. Joseph’s, please visit our website, oldstjoseph.org and read the material under the heading Weddings. Please call the parish office at 215-923-1766 at least nine months before your desired wedding date.

Rite of Christian Initiation
If you are an adult wishing to be baptized, or to receive First Eucharist and Confirmation, or are a baptized non-Catholic seeking full communion with Catholic Church, please call the parish office or email rcia@oldstjoseph.org.

Mass of Christian Burial
To schedule a funeral or memorial Mass, ask your funeral director to call the parish office.

Parish Pastoral Council
(osjpc@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Finance Council
Paul Shay, chair

Historic Preservation Corporation Board
Fr. Walter Modrys SJ, president

Adult Education
Rita O’Brien and Jeanmarie Zippo
(adulted@oldstjoseph.org)

Eldership
Pat Nelson (eldership@oldstjoseph.org)

Parish Life
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Ushers
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Children’s Liturgy of the Word
Peggy Connolly (clow@oldstjoseph.org)
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K.J. Alexander

To her, she’s just another foster kid.
To them, she’s the queen
who will save them all.

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