



Solidarity: Arduous Journey to the "Promised Land"

**Pastoral Letter on Racism
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Dearly beloved in Christ,

Our celebration of a Jubilee Year is a religious practice that has its roots in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, went to the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of His Messianic mission. He took the scroll and read the passage from the Prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament which speaks about the Jubilee and the Messiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and the release to the prisoners who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus is the fulfillment of all Jubilees. He comes to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor. The Jubilee of yore was a time dedicated in a special way to God. It fell every seventh year ("a week of years"). According to Mosaic Law, it was a Sabbath Year during which time fields were to be left fallow and slaves were to be freed. The Sabbath Year also called for a cancellation of all debts. All this was done in honor of God.

Every 50th year, (seven times seven, or a week of Sabbath years) was an even more solemn Sabbatical Year of Jubilee. Once again, an important part of the celebration was the emancipation of all the dwellers on the land in need of being freed. Even land that might have been lost to a family was restored as part of the Jubilee celebration. They could not be permanently deprived of the land because it belonged to God; nor could the Israelites remain in bondage since God had redeemed them for Himself by setting them free from slavery in Egypt.

From the prescriptions for the Old Testament Jubilee Observances, a social doctrine emerges and is developed

in the New Testament. Even in Old Testament times, the Jubilee was meant to restore equality among all the children of Israel. The Jubilee year provided for those in need, slaves, debtors, and sharecroppers. The foundations for this tradition were strictly theological, flowing from a theology of Creation and of Divine Providence. God has the Lordship over all creation, over our lives, even our debts. The social doctrine of the Church, our teaching on life issues, and justice issues, is rooted in the tradition of the Jubilee Year.

In calling for the celebration of the Jubilee Year, the Holy Father reminds us that "the joy of every Jubilee is above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion." He goes on to say: "Hence, it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should be more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and His Gospel, and instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which are truly forms of counter-witness and scandal" (T.M.A. 32).

One of the most egregious sins which we often fail to face as individuals, or as a community, is the sin of racism. It is a sin that has deeply marked the history of our country where black people were subjected to forced servitude, not because they were prisoners of war or common criminals, but simply because they were black. The devastating scars that slavery left on the black people, the destruction of family life, the economic deprivation and inferior social status have become a painful legacy for generations of African Americans, even in our own times. While positive changes have occurred at certain times, in various situations, racism not only persists in our world, but also in many places is powerfully resurgent. Hate crimes, church burnings at

home, and ethnic cleansing abroad are present-day realities.

Racism perpetuates a basic untruth that purports an innate superiority of one group over another because of skin color, culture, or ethnicity. This attitude contradicts the biblical understanding of God's action in creation whereby all human beings are made "in the image and likeness of God." Racism denies the dignity of each human being revealed by the mystery of the Incarnation and blasphemes the redemptive act of Christ who died on the cross to save all people. Indeed, Jesus calls us to lives of discipleship and servant-hood, without boundaries of race or class. Racism gives false permission for oppression and exploitation that is completely repugnant to the teachings of Christ.

Jesus' ministry is a clear manifestation of the universal love of the Father; for beyond His ministry to the Chosen People of Israel, Jesus reaches out to the pagans, curing the centurion's servant. The daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, as well as the possessed Gerasene man in the Decapolis, are also beneficiaries of the Lord's healing power. The Apostles themselves are surprised to find the Lord talking to the Samaritan woman at the well and certainly disconcerted by His bold assertion that many would come from the east and the west and would sit down at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when God's kingdom is realized.

The irresistible logic of Christ's teaching allows the Church to be truly Catholic, and to embrace the universalizing implications of the Gospel message. Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, saw the breaking down of the wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile as one of the great watersheds in the history of salvation. The Church proclaims our God who shows no partiality except, perhaps, for the margin-alized and excluded. St. James warns us about being "partial towards persons," about discriminating against those who are poor, or different in favor of the rich and famous. St. James, in his epistle admonishes us:

"My brothers, as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, you must never treat people in different ways according to their outward appearances" (James 2:1). The Sacred writer goes on to condemn this discrimination: "you are guilty of creating distinctions among yourselves and of making judgments based on evil motives" (James 2:4).

The teaching of Christ is unambiguous that the whole of our religion, "the Law and the Prophets" is based on the Great Commandment of Love. No matter how outstanding our talents or contributions, "if I have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). If we claim that we

love God but hate our neighbor, then we are "a Liar"; for "one cannot love God whom he has not seen, if he does not love his brother, whom he has seen" (1 John 4:20).

When asked for a definition of neighbor, our Lord answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus astonished his audience by making the Samaritan, the member of a despised minority group, the hero and protagonist of the story. In one fell swoop Jesus pops the bubble of ethnic superiority and at the same time challenges us to be a neighbor to all in need and to remove the barriers in our heart that prevent us from seeing our connectedness with every human being. For when Jesus says neighbor, He is talking about a big neighborhood: first of all anyone who is in need and has a claim on our help, as well as every man, woman and child of whatever religious persuasion, social status, ethnic or linguistic background, liberal or conservative, heterosexual or homosexual, Democrat or Republican, old or young, and all of the above, in all shades, colors and sizes. There is absolutely no room for racism and discrimination in Jesus' concept of neighbor.

We can truly love God only when we truly love our neighbor, made in His image and likeness. Apart from that love, there is no authentic religion. Because love is the essence of our religion, racism is a dangerous heresy that subverts the announcing of the Gospel.

The history of our country has been deeply marked by the sin of racism, which is a betrayal of our Christian faith as well as our democratic ideals. Despite great progress in the area of civil rights since the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., his dream of racial harmony is still a dream deferred. The "promised land" of integration where "children of former slaves and children of former slaveholders could sit down at the table of brotherhood," so much more difficult than desegregation, is still very elusive. Church burnings and other hate crimes continue, and motorists are still stopped for "driving while black." In the last year, 220 articles on racial violence appeared on the pages of The New York Times including the tragic high profile accounts of the torture of Abner Louima and the killing of Amadou Diallo.

It is with shame and sorrow that we recall the plight of Native Americans and Blacks, the two groups to suffer the most devastating effects of the sin of racism in our country. It is obvious that racism in all its forms and disguises is a dehumanizing force that demeans its victims and renders its perpetrators diminished in their humanity, or to use an expression of Pope Paul VI, "mutilated by their selfishness."

The racial tensions in the U.S. find a counterpart in the ethnic and nationalistic violence abroad. In fact, of the 50 million people who have died in armed conflicts since the end of World War II, most have perished in "ethnic" conflicts — in Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Mozambique, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, East Timor and the former Yugoslavia. The dawn of the new millennium finds the whole world struggling with a legacy of devastating racial and ethnic violence.

The challenge for believers is to build a civilization of love in a world where there is so much division. The ministry of reconciliation is a sacred duty of Christ's Church as we embark on a new millennium. Diversity must be seen as something that can enrich the human family. We must move from fear and suspicion to tolerance and from tolerance to solidarity. This is not a utopian quest but a moral imperative for peace and progress on our planet. Indeed, it is probably a question of survival. There will be a civilization of love or no civilization at all.

To combat racism at its root, we must begin with a personal inventory, an examination of conscience and a profound realization of how pernicious racism is. Racial bias profoundly affects our culture. It deforms relationships within and between racial or ethnic groups. It undermines the possibility of true community. In addition, racial bigotry exacerbates unhealthy competition, destroys people's self-confidence and initiative. This sin prevents us from being what God has called us to be.

Racism has many faces, not just a pointed hood of the white supremacists. It is evidenced in one's tendency to stereotype people, in an extreme pride in one's own country or race, in belittling members of other races, in condescending attitudes or behavior, and in not taking peoples of other races seriously. A racist attitude finds expression in a lack of impartiality, in the failure to recognize the negative impact of racism on the victim, by encouraging prejudice in others and laughing at racist jokes that are hurtful and demeaning.

In the Parable of Lazarus and Dives, the rich man goes to Hades, not for adultery, or murder, or robbery, but because he was incapable of seeing Lazarus suffering at his doorstep. In a similar fashion, racism makes one blind to the presence of persons of other races. They become like nameless pieces of furniture that clutter up the landscape. Racism will be banished when we overcome our blindness to the people around us; and when instead of being blind, we become color blind, indifferent to people's complexion, but not to their dignity and their feelings.

Desegregation was the process which eliminated discriminatory laws and barriers to full participation in American life. Integration is much more difficult to achieve because it demands a change of heart. Desegregation may unlock doors, but integration is when minds and hearts are opened as well, when the welcome mat is placed at the door.

Integration is so compelling because it is about people, not laws. It is about the way we see each other and treat others, it is about whether there will be room in our hearts and homes and classrooms and clubs and churches to welcome each other naturally as neighbors and friends. Desegregation is about laws; integration is about the Golden Rule.

In the play "South Pacific," Rodgers and Hammerstein have a song that goes: "You have to be taught to hate and fear. You have to be taught from year to year. It has to be drummed into your little ear. You have to be carefully taught."

Racism is like a disease most often transmitted from parent to child. Its early symptom is the delusion that one's race is somehow superior to others. In advanced stages, it leads to hatred, violence, and untold suffering. This contagion needs to be checked. The 20th century was able to entirely eliminate certain diseases like small pox and polio, but this spiritual disease of racism is still menacing our world as we begin a new millennium.

In the fight against any disease it is necessary to recognize the threat. Too often we are in denial about racism. The reality has been driven underground. Because cruder historic forms of racist sentiments and behavior are considered "politically incorrect," and because more laws have been passed, more "concessions" made, there is a false sense of security that the problem has been dealt with. But too often the spiritual problem has not been dealt with: repentance, change of heart, forgiveness, respect are still needed. Today's racism is more subtle but no less real. As the United States Catholic Conference Document, "Brothers and Sisters to Us," asserts racism, "is manifest also in the indifference that replaces open hatred. The minority poor are seen as the dross of a post-industrial society — without skills, without motivation, without incentive. They are expendable. Many times, the new face of racism is the computer printout, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public responsibility, individual success over social commitment, and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion" (B.S.T.U. 1997, p. 6).

In Catholic social teaching, the antidote for racism is Solidarity. It is a concept used by Paul VI in "*Populorum Progressio*" in his discussion of development. Pope John Paul II expands on this virtue in his Encyclical letter "*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*": "In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimensions of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. One's neighbor is then not only a human being with his or her own rights and a fundamental equality with everyone else, but becomes the living image of God the Father, redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and placed under the permanent action of the Holy Spirit. One's neighbor must therefore be loved, even if an enemy, with the same love with which the Lord loves him or her; and for that person's sake one must be ready for sacrifice, even the ultimate one: to lay down one's life for the brethren" (S.R.S. #40).

Solidarity is an expression of the great commandment that calls us to form a community among people that will enable us to overcome "structures of sin and oppression" that dog humanity. Above the human and natural bonds already so strong, faith leads us to see "a new model of the unity of the human race." The Holy Father insists that Solidarity is not sentimentality or a vague compassion or empathy for the suffering of so many, but rather it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say the good of all and of each individual, "because we are all really responsible for all" (SRS #38).

As we begin the 21st century and the third millennium, we must embrace the concept of solidarity as a solution to racism, as well as to the greed and the competition that has fractionalized our country and our planet. Solidarity is the virtue we need to instill in the new generation so that racism might become a sad anachronism in our lifetime. Just as racism is contagious, so too solidarity can inspire our young people when they see the witness of men and women committed to social justice and the good of the entire community.

As we campaign against cigarettes and drugs, we must also launch a campaign of zero tolerance for the intolerance of racism. Parents and teachers need to be the protagonists of this effort. Each of us ought to begin with our own personal conversion and testimony. We also need to create opportunities and space for friendship with people who are of different races and ethnic backgrounds. As a community we should celebrate the gifts and the traditions of all "our neighbors" and work together to build a better community where people care about each other.

Racism thrives on fear, but love casts out fear. Solidarity transforms relationships and connects us with each other. Fear and suspicion are changed into a sense of partnership in a community that truly recognizes the value of each and every person as irreplaceable and as precious in the eyes of God.

The virtue of solidarity is not only an antidote to our racial tensions in our own country, but points the way to a program of development and world peace based on a "new model of the unity of the human race." In his message for World Peace Day, January 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II states: "... we can set forth one certain principle: there will be peace only to the extent that humanity as a whole rediscovers its fundamental call to be one family, a family in which the dignity and rights of individuals, whatever their status, race or religion, are accepted as prior and superior to any kind of difference or distinction" (World Day of Peace #5).

Given the U.S. economic, cultural and military power, the Holy Father's dream of humanity becoming "a single family built on the values of justice, equity and solidarity" is in some ways contingent on the ability of Americans of good will being able to bring about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of the "Promised Land" of racial integration in our corner of the globe.

As we cross the threshold of hope from a century of violence into a new millennium, our quest is to become what God has called us to be. We make our own the song:

*"God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way:
Thou who hast by thy might, led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we
met thee;
Shadowed beneath thy hand, may we forever stand
True to our God. True to our native land."*

Devotedly yours in Christ,
+ Seán, OFM Cap.
Bishop of Fall River
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