



“RACISM IS A LIFE ISSUE”

An examination of *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*

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In November 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the pastoral letter on racism: *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*. On its face, *Open Wide Our Hearts* is a strong denunciation of the evil of the racism that still plagues the United States. When examined deeper, the letter presents an irrefutable logic that binds moral concerns with the urgency of public policy and the practice of everyday life. There is one particular passage, however, that stands out. The American bishops write:

The injustice and harm racism causes are an attack on human life. The Church in the United States has spoken out consistently and forcefully against abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, the death penalty, and other forms of violence that threaten human life. It is not a secret that these attacks on human life have severely affected people of color, who are disproportionately affected by poverty,

targeted for abortion, have less access to healthcare, have the greatest numbers on death row, and are most likely to feel pressure to end their lives when facing serious illness. As bishops, we unequivocally state that racism is a life issue.¹

The declaration that racism is a “life issue” is a powerful statement concerning how the bishops view the continued presence and, in recent years, resurgence of racism in the United States. Some people will take issue with this statement as it, most assuredly, adds a degree of complexity to the already complex designation of “life issues.” In this essay, I will attempt to unpack why this designation is justified.

First, it is necessary to establish that the impact of racism extends far past the present. Our prejudice, corruption, and viciousness outlive us. Long after our immediate descendants and we have passed into historical

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irrelevance, the structures that we tolerated in order to elevate various hatreds to normalcy and privilege endure as intellectual monuments and institutional rules.

This is the case with Jim Crow laws and their architects’ legacy in the United States. The racial-social-economic present is a result of the past efforts of the promoters of Jim Crow to guarantee some form of white supremacy like that of the ante-bellum period, which had rapidly passed into a romanticized ideal. Communities of color were the victims of the imposition of a multigenerational caste system in which their primary role was that of terrorized consumers of white economic goods and services while being denied the means to develop their own economic foundations. If we use 1968 as our benchmark for the collapse of the Jim Crow system, then the United States has only existed as a liberal democracy for 51 years as of the writing of this essay.

Second, we must accept that racism itself is a violation of natural law. Race is an illogical method of categorizing humans. It does not exist in nature, and it is not an accurate marker of intellectual ability, physical ability, or talent. It is not even an accurate marker of culture. Natural categories such as humanity are immutable, while race is fluid and, rather than being found in nature, is solely a human invention. For example, in the United States before the Civil War, the Irish were not considered white; but in present time the descendants of Irish immigrants are considered white. What changed? Did the Irish suddenly metamorphize into a form that categorized them as white? Of course not. How white is defined changed to include them. The same is true for the descendants of Italian, Russian, and European Jewish immigrants.

Third, we must accept that racism poses a genuine danger to the human condition. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states,

[T]he common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.²

All humans have the right to “truly human conditions,” but racism hinders this. Racism seeks to marginalize a targeted group in society.

What does it mean to marginalize? It is not merely a matter of preventing a group from participating in civic life. It also means to impoverish them materially. Because racism always reserves prosperity for the group held as superior, by default the inferior group is deliberately consigned to poverty. Racism is not an inert belief system; it actively seeks to cause suffering because the inferiority it ascribes to the other is inevitably imposed through force of law and violence. In this way, racism is a life issue. Because racism impoverishes, it denies human beings access to an adequate education and gainful work. This in turn denies human beings access to nutritious food, adequate clothing, and medicines necessary to maintain health. Cumulatively, this hurts the family unit. Oppression is the denial of the necessities of living a truly human life; therefore, racism violates the culture of life.

For Catholics, the inclusion of racism as a life issue necessitates action, but the question of how to act remains. Interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and systemic racism are all manifestations of the same evil differentiated by magnitude. They are interrelated, but remedying them is difficult. Unfortunately, there is no shortage of individuals who are invested in promoting racism. So, where do we start in the light of social structures that are old, complex, and resilient?

There is no single answer for this, but I will offer one suggestion. Those who oppose racism must cease being reactive and become active in their opposition. Too often, we are reactive to racism as if it were something new and unexpected. This habit has left us at a decided disadvantage when it comes to combatting racism. Interpersonally, we know what racism looks like, but how often do we promote unapologetically inclusive environments? Institutionally, we know what policies keep our brothers and sisters marginalized, but how often do we target those policies for legislative advocacy and repeal? How often are we actively proposing new legislation and policies that target the institutions that act as gatekeepers for prosperity? Systemically, we know that racism is the emperor of malicious human conventions that will doom civilization if left unchallenged. We have been called to challenge this evil. But will we heed the call?

ENDNOTES

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2018). *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call of Love—A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*, p. 30 at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>.
- 2 Catholic Church. (2000). *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1908.