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A Joint Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Mississippi
Against the Evils of Racism
July 4, 2020

We join our voices to vehemently denounce racism, a plague among us. It is an evil and a force of destruction that eats away at the soul of our nation. Ultimately, it is a moral problem that requires a moral remedy—a transformation of the human heart—and compels us to act. “The evil of racism festers in part because in our nation there has been very limited formal acknowledgement of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation and all too often a neglect of our history.” (Open Wide Our Hearts)

“Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love - a pastoral letter against racism” was officially endorsed in November, 2018 at the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Annual Conference in Baltimore. Following upon this near unanimous endorsement, the Cause for Canonization of Sister Thea Bowman, the granddaughter of slaves, the only African American member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, a woman who transcended racism to leave a lasting mark on Catholic life in the late 20th century, was introduced and overwhelmingly approved by the bishops. A prophetic document and a prophetic life combined to show our nation a better way, the path to greater justice and peace, whose beginning and end is the dignity of the human person.

As the Church seeks to be a leaven in society for solidarity, liberty and justice for all, we must recognize our participation in the chains of racism. “Therefore, we the Catholic bishops of the United States acknowledge the many times when the Church has failed to live as Christ taught, to love our brothers and sisters. Acts of racism have been committed by leaders and members of the Catholic Church, by bishops, clergy, religious and laity, and her institutions. We express deep sorrow and regret for them.” (Open Wide Our Hearts)

Significant numbers of African Americans are born into economic and social disparity. We must recognize that generations of African Americans were disadvantaged by slavery, wage theft, “Jim Crow” laws, and the systematic denial of access to numerous wealth-building opportunities reserved for others. Racism can 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. (Open Wide Our Hearts)

The heartless killing of George Floyd sparked a national outcry against the tyranny of racism. The actions and inactions of the officers involved are symptomatic of a pattern that has reached critical mass and has exploded across our nation and beyond. That brutal assault violates the fundamental truth lamented in “Open Wide our Hearts” that all people are created in the image and likeness of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and all too often, hatred. In the Gospel of John 3:16 we hear the foundation of the Christian faith that “God so loved the world he sent his only Son.” Not surprisingly, in the first letter of John 3:15 we hear “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.”

Despite the great blessings of liberty that this country offers, especially our freedoms afforded in the First Amendment, which includes both the freedom of religion and to peaceful protest, we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger. At the same time, we reject harsh rhetoric that belittles and dehumanizes our law enforcement personnel as a whole, most of whom labor to keep our communities safe, and we condemn attacks against police and the rioting and violence taking place across our country.

Sister Thea addressed the toxic reality of racism on many occasions and spoke on behalf of her people. “When I was growing up, many of the old women who had undergone the ignominy of slavery were around, and they told us about slavery because we had to know about freedom. They told us about misery. The black woman has a task when the world says to her children, when the world says to her husband, when the world says to her mamma and to her, ‘there is something wrong with you. Your skin is too black. Your nose is too flat. Your hair is too nappy and too short. And you’re slow. And you’re ignorant. And you can’t learn like white folks. And you’re immoral.’ That’s what the racist society told us and told our children about themselves. The result was one of the great problems of the black community, the problem of low self-esteem, and it kills us.” (Mercy College of Detroit 1989). A poster at one of the peaceful protests in our nation illuminates this lament. “We said black lives matter. Never said: only black lives matter. We know: all lives matter. We just need your help ... black lives are in danger.”

The enduring call to love is the heart of the matter and the antidote to this toxin. Love is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. For many in Mississippi who strive to live by the Word of God, we cannot ignore the prophets. “You have been told, o mortal, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8), and from the prophet Amos, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:2)

Sister Thea’s life is a living legacy and testimony to the sacrifice and commitment of many in the Catholic Church for generations across Mississippi in the quest to overcome racism. Sister Thea was born in Yazoo City, Mississippi, December 29, 1937, and grew up in Canton. Her mother was

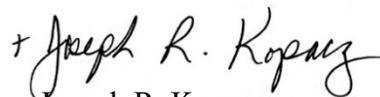
a teacher and her father was the only African American physician in Canton. Her parents sent her to Holy Child Jesus School. Thea was reared as a Protestant, until at age nine when she asked her parents if she could become Catholic. “I was drawn to examine and accept the Catholic faith because of the day-to-day witness of Catholic Christians who first loved me, then shared with me their story, their values, their beliefs; who first loved me, then invited me to share with them in community, prayer and mission. As a child I did not recognize evangelization at work in my life. I did recognize love, service, community, prayer and faith.” (The non-Catholic in the Catholic School)

Gifted with a brilliant mind, beautiful voice and a dynamic personality, Sister Thea shared the message of God’s love through a teaching career. After 16 years of teaching at the elementary, secondary school and university level, the bishop of Jackson, Mississippi invited her to become the consultant for intercultural awareness. In her role as consultant Sister Thea gave presentations across the country; lively gatherings that combined singing, gospel teaching, prayer and storytelling. Her programs were directed to break down racial and cultural barriers. She encouraged people to communicate with one another so that they could understand other cultures and races. In 1984, Sister Thea was diagnosed with breast cancer. She prayed ‘to live until I die.’ Her prayer was answered, and Sister Thea continued her gatherings seated on a wheel chair. In 1989, the U. S. Bishops invited her to be a key speaker at their conference on Black Catholics. At the end of the meeting, Sister Thea’s invitation, the bishops stood and sang “We Shall Overcome” with gusto. Sister Thea lived a full Life. She fought evil, especially prejudice, suspicion, hatred, and things that drive people apart. She fought for God and God’s people until her death in 1990. (Cause for Canonization)

As bishops in our time in Mississippi, we recommit ourselves to continue to liberate the Church from the evil of racism that severely compromises our mission to make disciples of all nations in the name of Jesus Christ. With the ordained priests and deacons, religious and laity in our diocese we pledge ourselves to strengthen our Catholic tradition to educate, to serve, and to empower all who are on the margins in our communities, especially those who are oppressed by the yoke of racism. We are not powerless and the witness of Sister Thea’s life is an icon of hope that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)



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Practical suggestions and goals for the Catholic Dioceses of Mississippi

This list is not comprehensive, but meant to provide a practical starting place for clergy and the faithful on engaging effectively in combating racism, that begins in the human heart.

As a parish:

- Read or re-read “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism” using the accompanying Study Guide. Visit <http://uscgb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/index.cfm>
- Priests and Deacons to preach against racism and our personal responsibility to eradicate it and encourage dialog in the parish and community
- At Mass and prayer services, include prayer to end racism and the injustice it causes
- Engage Parish Pastoral Council and Parish Finance Council members in the discussion on racism
- Hold listening seminars for parishioners and community members to reflect on life experiences - encourage reflection on upbringing and how it has influenced perceptions of ‘the other person’
- Provide and attend intergenerational and interracial discussion or seminar on racism
- Provide opportunity for chaplains and police departments to join seminars and discussions on racism

As individuals:

- Acquaint yourself with Catholic Social Teaching and the pastoral letter against racism “Open Wide Our Hearts”
- Educate yourself on the history and causes of racism in our Country
- Exercise your right to vote
- Speak out whenever you see injustice, racism or discrimination
- Do not take part in racial or discriminatory humor
- Support efforts to help strengthen family life
- Share your time and treasure by involving yourself in diocesan and parish outreach to those in need
- Talk to your children about the pain and injustice caused by racism
- As a family, pray for justice, peace, and love of neighbor