RESPECT LIFE MONTH

COMBATTING RACISM

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RACISM TODAY

“The roots of racism have extended deeply into the soil of our society. Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality – economic and social – that we still see all around us. With renewed vigor, we call on the members of the Body of Christ to join others in advocating and promoting policies at all levels that will combat racism and its effects in our civic and social institutions. ‘Even in the developed world,’ Pope Francis told members of the U.S. Congress, ‘the effects of unjust structures and actions are all too apparent. Our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples."

This quote is taken from a statement written by the Catholic Bishops of the United States at the end of 2018. That may be surprising. First, that the Catholic Bishops of the US have written a document about racism. And, that in 2018, systemic racism is still a dividing problem in our nation.

In fact, there are people who would contend that racism is actually getting worse in the last few years rather than better. There is a great deal of speculation as to why this is true. Some blame our nation’s immigration crisis. Others, the rise of social media and unconventional internet resources and groups that allow people with bigoted opinions to connect and expand their impact. Still, others say that economics and employment factors continue to plague certain race and cultural groups.

Whatever the causes, Christians in a particular way are called upon to combat racism in every form and work toward harmony among peoples. Why Christians? Because we have the opportunity to not only join in the temporal (earthly) work the bishops speak about above, but we also know that economic and social policy can only go so far. What is truly needed is a conversion of hearts and minds to the truth that all people are created in equal dignity by a loving Father, and that we are all brothers and sisters in Him. This is the foundation of our inalienable rights.

The Bishops write, "Racism is a moral problem that requires a moral remedy—a transformation of the human heart—that impels us to act. The power of this type of transformation will be a strong catalyst in eliminating those injustices that impinge on human dignity."

THE PAST OF RACISM

Human rights are undeniably universal. They include the rights to life, basic physical needs such as food, water, and shelter, freedom from violence, the practice of religion without interference, and protection against unjust discrimination:

"The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: 'Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design'"

(CCC 1935, quoting paragraph 2 of the Vatican II document Gaudium et Spes.)

DEHUMANIZATION

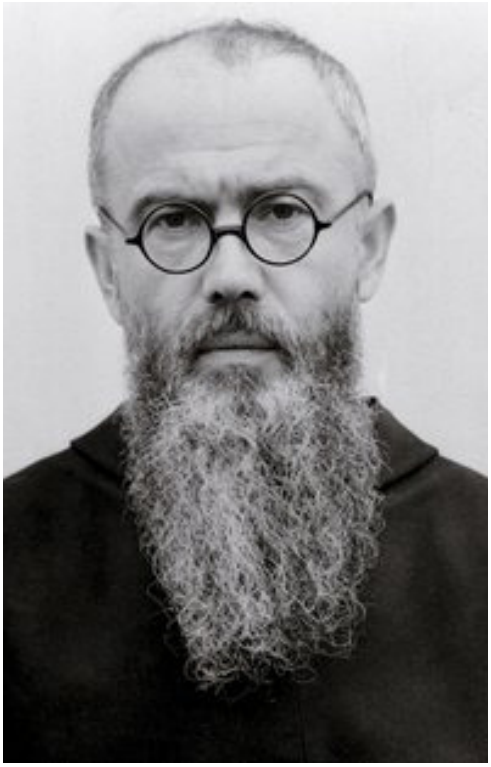
During World War II the Holocaust—or "Shoah"—was the organized, systematic, government-backed annihilation of approximately six million Jewish men, women, and children at the hands of the Nazi regime that ruled Germany between 1933 and 1945. The Nazis used propaganda to spread a message that the German people were racially superior and that the Jews were inferior. In addition to the Jews, the Nazis also targeted the Roma people and certain marginalized groups, such as those with physical or intellectual disabilities.

In 1933, there were over nine million Jews living in the countries that Nazi Germany would soon occupy. It is important to note that many Germans and those of other nationalities from around the world did not initially understand the full scope of what Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany, was planning.

Little by little, over the mid-1930s and into the late 1930s, laws were introduced that systematically disenfranchised Jews within German society under the Nazis. The Jews were falsely portrayed as the cause of woes in German society, and propaganda was spread effectively criminalizing their presence and influence in society. They were regarded more and more as sub-human, until Hitler secretly initiated his “Final Solution” to exterminate Jews across the European continent.

The Nazis initially estimated that the “Final Solution” would kill 11 million people. Concentration camps and extermination camps were set up and operated through Western and Eastern Europe. Millions of Jews and others considered undesirable were forcefully deported to these camps, primarily between 1941 and 1944.

Both inside and outside of Germany many were either entirely unaware of what was happening, or in denial that millions of people who had disappeared were being wiped out of society. On May 7, 1945, the Nazi German armed forces surrendered to the allied nations led by the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. The Holocaust was a lesson, for those willing to learn it, about the need to recognize others’ human dignity, and to confront evil when it is in our midst.



In the midst of the atrocities of the Holocaust, St. Maximilian Kolbe provides an example of self-sacrificing love and respect for the dignity of all people, despite race or cultural movements. In the middle of Nazi Germany, St. Maximilian opened up a temporary hospital to aid those in need and provided shelter for refugees which included hiding 2,000 Jews from German persecution.

On February 17, 1941, the monastery was shut down; Kolbe was arrested by the German Gestapo and three months later, he was transferred to Auschwitz. Toward the end of his second month in Auschwitz, men were chosen to face death by starvation to warn against escapes. Francis Gajowniczek, a married man with young children was among those chosen to die, and Maximilian volunteered his life in place of Francis’s life so that Francis would have the chance to go home to his children. St. Maximilian Kolbe died on August 14, and is considered a martyr, not for the cause of his faith alone, but for the sake of the life and dignity of another person in need.

About 70 years ago, students Sohpie Scholl, Hans Scholl, Alezander Schmorell and Willi Graf were arrested in Munich's city center. All three belonged to the "White Rose", a group that resisted Adolf Hitler's regime and the systematic racism happening. They were carrying thousands of pamphlets that listed the crimes of the Nazi Regime. The would leave the pamphlets in mailboxes in appeal to people's humanity.

The siblings Sophie and Hans Scholl once participated in the Nazi organization called National Socialism, but later realized their faith and moral convictions were not in line with the goals of National Socialism. The siblings lead, by Hans, founded a group to protest against the Nazi government at Munich University- 5 medical students and a philosophy professor formed the core of the group. The group created publications called "Flyers from the White Rose" and left the pamphlets in public spots. The sixth pamphlet became the last, Sophie and Hans were distributing the flyer at the university and were discovered and arrested after being caught throwing a pile of pamphlets from a balcony into the square below. The Gestapo interrogated them, and even then both siblings stayed firmed in their belief. They were sentenced on February 22nd, 1943. Han's last words, were, "Long live freedom!".

CIVILS RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

“Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist.” With these words, the US Bishops remind each of us that ending racism is our responsibility. That, through our own daily actions, we can be creating either a world that is more generous and loving or one that is hardened and filled with hatred.

Since the time of the founding fathers, our country has been blessed with citizens who have had the courage to rise to the challenges of their day and call their fellow citizens forward in the unending task of building an ever more just nation. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one such figure who directed his work toward both the structural and personal causes of racism and whose witness continues to inspire work to transform our communities today.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929. He was the son and grandson of pastors at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. In King's youth, he attended racially segregated public schools in Georgia. A bright young man, King graduated from high school early, at only fifteen years old, and he went on to study at Morehouse College in Atlanta, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948. He then studied further at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and Boston University, earning his doctoral degree from the latter in 1955.

One example of his witness on civil rights, in December of 1955, King helped to organize and lead the blacks of Montgomery, Alabama to boycott the city's buses, which were segregated. This became known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and it lasted for just over a year, into December of 1956. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was jailed, his home was bombed, and he underwent significant mistreatment. However, he never relented, and, in December of 1956, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that it was unconstitutional to segregate buses.

The Gospel was at the core of King's rhetoric. He believed in nonviolent witness and was strictly committed to uniting all of those working for civil rights into one voice—believing that much greater gains could be accomplished through unity than through division. He opposed oppression, ignorance and violence. He called on all of his followers and supporters to remain steadfast in the pursuit of their high goals, even amidst threats of violence, jail, and further persecution of themselves and their families.

Until his assassination on April 4, 1968, King spoke out against numerous injustices in society, particularly those stemming from racial disharmony. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., stands as a figure whose legacy includes fostering racial harmony, and who witnessed to how the Good News of Jesus Christ underscores our inalienable human dignity, which God has bestowed on every one of us.

LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS
LEARN FROM OUR DIFFERENCES

Saint John's proclamation in the Gospel, that the Word became flesh, reveals the inseparable bond between God's word and the human words by which he communicates with us. (...) God does not reveal himself in the abstract, but by using languages, imagery and expressions that are bound to different cultures. This relationship has proved fruitful, as the history of the Church abundantly testifies. Today it is entering a new phase due to the spread of the Gospel and its taking root within different cultures, as well as more recent developments in the culture of the West. The phenomenon of culture is, in its various aspects, an essential truth of human experience.

"Man lives always according to a culture which is properly his, and which in turn creates among persons a bond which is properly theirs, one which determines the inter-human and social character of human existence"

-John Paul II, Address to UNESCO (2 June 1980), 6: AAS 72 (1980), 738

Racism has been part of the American story since the very early days of colonization. Our history has taught us much more than we can imagine. But, our difficult episodes and stories have not been in vain. The struggle has been a vow of freedom that constantly challenges us to a future of greatness and hope.

Racism is an attack on the image of God that has been given to every one of us by the Creator (Gen. 5:1-3). Because each person has been created by God, we are all united together with the Lord and with each other.

Racism rejects what God has done by refusing to acknowledge the image of God in the other, the stranger and the one who is different. The fact that we were created in the image of God should remind us that each person is a living expression of God that must be respected and preserved and never dishonored.

Christians are asked to reject the narrow thinking of racism and instead embrace diversity as a gift of God. When the world was created, God could have used a single color or a single theme. But he did not. We see an endless breadth and depth to the imagination of God. The mountains and the deserts; the wonders of the sea and the ever-expanding reaches of the universe.

The same is true with our brothers and sisters in our human family. God did not intend for there to be just one way of being, one type of person. He created a world of families and races, cultures and societies. He also created each individual unique from the other—irreplaceable. Even identical twins have unique traits and personalities.

It is this difference that is a blessing of creation. At times in history, differences between races have been seen, even by Christians, as a type of mistake. We can think of the way native people have been treated, Jewish people, enslaved people. Some of that thinking still exists today. It is a contortion of the beautiful gift of difference and uniqueness in the world God created.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, WE ARE ALL ONE

Racism is divisive and damages the harmony and oneness that should characterize all our relationships. Difference in creation is God's gift to our world; unity and harmony among all people is the gift that we return to God in love.

Following the advice of St. Paul, we can pray for the grace to look beyond our own prejudices: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph: 4:32). Recall that before his death, Christ prayed, "May they all be one" (Jn 17:21).

Scripture teaches: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). This simple, straightforward teaching constitutes the heart of Christian ethics and is the reason Pope Benedict XVI can say, "One is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether" (Deus Caritas Est 16).

To love our neighbor, fundamentally, is to respect him or her as a unique person made in the image and likeness of God. If we do not offer this respect to the creature, then we dishonor the Creator. Such a basic truth of the Christian faith must therefore be our guide when we consider the many kinds of people we encounter; people of different races, creeds, and traditions.

"I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

-Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What would cause someone to believe false rhetoric about a group of people?
- Why did so many people in Nazi Germany come to incorrectly believe that Jews did not have the same human rights or dignity as others in society?
- How was government-sanctioned racial segregation an affront to the God-given human dignity of those who experienced discrimination.
- How did those who experienced segregation still possess human dignity even though the government (e.g. the Supreme Court) did not recognize their basic human rights?
- How is God the origin of this human dignity, and of our basic human rights?
- How does systemic racism, which has historic roots as well as modern-day manifestations, continue to erode the human dignity of many persons of color today?

**Much of the content for this student handout is taken directly from the USCCB's "Combatting Racism—Educational Resources: High School Activities"*

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