

PASTORAL MATERIAL TOOLKIT



The Challenge of Racism Today

A Pastoral Letter by Cardinal Donald Wuerl

PASTORAL MATERIAL TOOLKIT

for

THE CHALLENGE OF RACISM TODAY

A Pastoral Letter by Cardinal Donald Wuerl

ANNOUNCEMENTS

For Bulletins

- Cardinal Wuerl has issued a short pastoral letter entitled *The Challenge of Racism Today*. It invites us to reflect on our own responsibility and the responsibility of the Church to be agents of reconciliation and harmony. You can find a copy of the letter at adw.org.
- In his new pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Racism Today*, Cardinal Wuerl invites us to reflect on the sin of racism and our obligation as Christians to foster reconciliation, dialogue, and unity. You can find a copy of the letter at adw.org.
- In November the Church celebrates Black Catholic History Month. This year, Cardinal Wuerl has issued a pastoral letter on the sin of racism and its continued presence in people's hearts and in our institutions. You can find a copy of the letter at adw.org.

Pulpit Announcement

- Cardinal Wuerl has issued a short pastoral letter entitled *The Challenge of Racism Today*. It invites us to reflect on our own responsibility and the responsibility of the Church to be agents of reconciliation and harmony. You will find a copy of the letter in today's bulletin (at the back of the Church). Please be sure to take a copy home.

HOMILY HELP – 1

1. FACING THE REALITY OF RACISM

- a. Any counselor, therapist, spiritual director, or person with common sense will tell you that the starting point of addressing or fixing any problem is admitting that it actually exists.
- b. **Either racism is real or it isn't.** If it is, then that means it is a human rights issue, a human dignity issue, and a sin issue! Addressing incidents of RACIAL INJUSTICE is more tangible, identifiable, and therefore more effective when trying to make the case that this is a real issue TODAY. "Racism" is too large an umbrella and much more abstract; as such, it is less likely to win over the skeptic.
- c. **Avoid Partisan Politics.** If racial injustice is a reality, then examples of it should be able to stand on its own regardless of one's party affiliation. Our loyalty to the mission of the Gospel and the proclamation of the truth must always be first and foremost. Loyalty to Christ must always upstage loyalty to one's political leanings or party affiliation.
- d. **Get informed** – FEW people who have lived in the United States for more than 48 hours don't have strong and passionate feelings, opinions, and beliefs on the topic of racism and racial justice. But whatever ones opinion is, it should be a well-informed opinion rooted in facts and reality. Many are not. As pastors and leaders we have a moral obligation to be informed about what we speak in order to make a compelling case about the reality of racial injustice, its corruptive nature on the fabric of our society, and its devastating – even deadly – consequences on those who are victims of it. So, we have to make the necessary concerted effort to seek out the facts about racism in the past and present. Here are some ways we can be better informed:
 - i. Making a concerted and deliberate effort to reach out to and listen to the experiences of victims of racial prejudice and racial injustice. Set up appointments with members of "minority" groups who are a part of your own parish and ask them to share their thoughts and feelings on the subject honestly with you. The Cardinal's Letter gives you an easy excuse to start the conversation!
 - ii. Watching the recently released and profoundly compelling movie 13th (a documentary on the 13th Amendment that **explores the history of racial inequality in the United States**) to get informed about the unjust and dire consequences of racial prejudice. View similar documentaries on the plight of immigrants and refugees.

- iii. **Reading published works of the most articulate and compelling voices on the subject** OR - for the sake of time - LISTENING to them and watching them on YouTube (e.g., Michele Alexander on the racial injustice inherent in the prison system, or Alabama attorney Brian Stevenson, who discusses racial injustice in the criminal justice system).
- iv. **Meeting with and/or chatting with your brothers among the fraternity** of priests who are a part of "minority" groups – Ask about their experience.
- v. **Delving deeper into the history of the United States and the Catholic Church in the United States:** Three books that are extremely informative, enlightening, and factually-based are *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglas Blackmon; *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* by Benedictine Father Cyprian Davis; and *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests* by Stephen Oates. Also, there are several statements on racism by the USCCB and – in addition to our archbishop – other ordinaries (e.g. Bishop Braxton) in dioceses and archdioceses around the US.

2. CONFRONTING RACISM WITHOUT FEAR

- a. Upholding the Gospel Standard - In Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he said that the Church was created to serve as a thermostat for society (i.e., something that sets the standard then challenges the surrounding environment to rise to its standards); but today it seems that the Church acts more like a thermometer (i.e., something that simply reflects or mirrors the standards and climate of society as it is). On the issue of racism and racial injustice, what are practical ways that the Church can serve more as a thermostat – or standard bearer – on this issue.
- b. Look in Before You Look Out – We must confront – that is, take an honest look at - our own prejudices and harsh and often unfair judgements of others based not on proven facts but assumptions and stereotypes. This includes the Church. The Cardinal's Pastoral Letter references the decision of St. John Paul II taking the unprecedented step of acknowledging the "sins committed by members of the Church" in history.
- c. Remember the End Game: Reconciliation - Avoid being argumentative and accusatory. The plight of any suffering people deserve our special attention. Abolitionists and saints like St. Peter Claver spoke and acted on behalf of the lives of slaves. Every January thousands rally and protest in defense of the lives of the unborn. When any group feels that the only way to be heard is to cry out and protest (e.g.,

immigrants, victims of domestic violence, the elderly, the poor, etc.), the wisest and kindest thing that one can do is LISTEN, hear them out, and lend a hand – not dismiss their cries as illegitimate, or deliberately misrepresent their claims and concerns and walk away.

- d. Remember “The Golden Rule” – treat others the way you want them to treat you. **Wouldn’t you be upset if...** (e.g., you were profiled, treated differently, not granted a job interview, had poorer schools, told that there is no vacancy, presumed guilty or dangerous, less intelligent, because of your skin color, etc.)? Racism seems to be one of those topics where **empathy** takes a back seat to defensiveness and self-justification. Dare to walk in the others’ moccasins.

- e. Exercise the Virtue of Courage - The Christian life is not for wimps or the faint of heart! It requires courage. When growing up most parents teach their children to NOT go looking for trouble. Yet as a Christian we are commanded to do just the opposite: Go, look for trouble; troubled hearts, troubled lives, troubled and victimized groups; troubling and discriminating laws or policies that disproportionately adversely affect one group above all others; and troubling behavior that violates the person and devalues human dignity. We don’t shrink from the evil in our society; rather, like firefighters when the alarm sounds, we rush to confront and overcome it.

- f. Note the many examples of Jesus in the Gospels –
 - i. Moments after his baptism and following the Holy Spirit’s lead, Jesus took the offensive! He didn’t wait for evil to personally affect him; he set out to confront the Evil One who was the source of such suffering and heartache and heartbreak for God’s people.
 - ii. Jesus regularly and fearlessly confronted evil. Note these two striking descriptions of Jesus and his mission in Acts 10:38 and in 1 John 3:8: “**God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.**” (Acts 10:38) and “**The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil**” (1 John 3:8).

3. OVERCOMING RACISM THROUGH FAITH AND ACTION

- a. Learning from the Story of David and Goliath - No one wanted to face the mighty warrior Goliath. Everyone concluded that he was too big to be confronted, too skilled to be outsmarted and too vicious to be defeated. David rejected these beliefs completely; he RAN toward the giant and defeated him in with one blow from his slingshot! The

question is why? Why was his response different than all the others around him? Why was he so certain that we would prevail? The answer is that while he was fully aware that the giant was bigger and more skilled than he was, he was even MORE CERTAIN that Goliath was not bigger or more skilled than his God! And he knew God was on his side. This is the same David that wrote in the Psalms: ***"I put no trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory. You are the one who gives us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame"*** (Psalm 44:7-8). **David had faith.** With this gift he could move forward, take action, and achieve the impossible. **So can we.**

- i. Relying on God's Strength - ***"Draw Your Strength from the Lord and his mighty power"*** (Ephesians 6:10). **Racism** is described in this document as "a sin," a divisive evil," a source deep "pain" for many, and an "offense against God." Translation? The evil of racism is bigger than all of us. But it's not bigger than God. As sharers in the priesthood of Jesus Christ and anointed by the same Spirit, we as Christians, clergy and laity alike, are not only called to confront evil and lies, but to do so WITH CONFIDENCE in the success of our efforts. In other words, we must ourselves believe in the Gospel that we preach - specifically, to believe in the power of God to overcome this evil.
 - ii. Ready to face the Giant - With this faith, WE become free - free from our fears and free to move toward - even run toward - this "Goliath" with full knowledge that racism, racial prejudice, and racial injustice does not intimidate God - and no longer should it intimidate us.
- b. Prophetic Witnesses - Regaining the Moral High Ground - No political party or ideology has a monopoly on the Truth. Whether it be taking a stand for the unborn or the undocumented, the refugee or the incarcerated, the unemployed or the discriminated, **our stand for Christ must be consistent and unambiguous** even if our political affiliations are not. ***"The Lord hears the cry of the poor"*** (Psalm 34) - *all of them.* No political party can honestly make that claim.
- c. Understand the Nature of Darkness: The Absence of Light - Someone once said, ***"If the world is filled with darkness, the problem is NOT the darkness; the problem is the light"*** (Unknown). Jesus said of his disciples, ***"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a bushel basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand where it gives light to everyone in the entire house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"*** (Matthew 5:14-16). We, the Body of Christ, should face and confront the evil of racism without fear or intimidation because dwelling in our

midst is Jesus Christ, the Light of the World; the Light that the darkness could not overcome (John 1:5). If we are willing to embrace him who is the Light and allow the light of his Truth to illumine the darkness of our ignorance, our prejudices, and our fears, then we will begin to see the dark cloud of racism lifting as the Light of the Son brings about a new and glorious dawn.

HOMILY HELP - 2

God's Vision:

- **The beauty of diversity** in the unity of our faith is noted by the Cardinal: *The sight from the sanctuary of many a church in our archdiocese offers a glimpse of the face of the world.*
- **This diversity is from God himself** who has not only created a rich tapestry of humankind but also delights to unite us all in his Church. One of the Psalms says: *Babylon and Egypt I will count among those who know me; Philistia, Tyre, Ethiopia, these will be her children and Zion shall be called "Mother" for all shall be her children." It is he, the Lord Most High, who gives each his place. In his register of peoples he writes: "These are her children," and while they dance they will sing: "In you all find their home."* (Psalm 87:1-7)
- **Jesus sets forth the realization of God's desire in his great commission:** *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28:19-20)

Sinful Revisions:

- **Given God's desire and command to include all in his Kingdom, the Cardinal teaches us: *We are called to face, confront, and overcome racism.*** *This challenge is not an option. Jesus warns us against wrathful disparagement of others: Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' will be subject to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be subject to the fire of hell.* (Matthew 5:22). Thus Jesus counsels us: *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.* (Matthew 5:23-24).
- **The Cardinal cites the *Catechism*** and bids us to remember, *Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.* And he adds: *There is no basis to sustain that some are made more in the image of God than others.*
- **Citing previous teachings by the bishops, the Cardinal is clear: *Racism is a sin. It is a sin because it divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family and violates the***

fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. We have no right or capacity to overrule God or reject the dignity he himself has established. The Cardinal describes racism as a denial of the goodness of creation.

- **While some dispute the particulars of racism in this or that situation, we cannot simply brush aside the consistent experience of so many** of our brothers and sisters. The Cardinal reminds us: *To address racism, we need to recognize two things: that it exists in a variety of forms, some more subtle and others more obvious; and that there is something we can do about it... even if we realize that what we say and the steps we take will not result in an immediate solution to a problem that spans generations. We are reminded by St. Paul, There should be no division in the body, but that its members should have mutual concern for one another. If one member suffers, every member suffers with him. (1 Cor. 12:25-26)*
- **We must admit that, as a Church, we have not always lived up to the call that God has given us.** The Cardinal writes: *Saint John Paul II in the Great Jubilee Year asked for the recognition of sins committed by members of the Church during its history. He called for a reconciliation through recalling the faults of the past in a spirit of prayerful repentance that leads to healing of the wounds of sin. So acknowledging our sins and seeking to remedy what we can, we turn with sorrow to those we have offended, individually and collectively, and also express gratitude for the tenacity of their faith.... We also recognize the enduring faith of immigrants who have not always felt welcome in the communities they now call home.*

Overcoming Divisions

- **Therefore the Cardinal also teaches us: Because God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, we have received the ministry of reconciliation.** Saint Paul tells us, *"God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ... entrusting to us the message of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Please consider making a spiritual and careful reading of the Pastoral Letter of the Cardinal and see it as an honest assessment of our need for the recognition of racism and repentance for any cooperation in it, past or present. Consider too his call for us to entrust our hearts to the Lord so that we can, as he states, *envision the new city of God, not built by human hands, but by the love of God poured out in Jesus Christ.*

HOMILY HELP – 3

In his pastoral letter *The Challenge of Racism Today*, Cardinal Wuerl teaches us how the mission of the Church is to restore our relationship with God and each other in Jesus Christ.

Recognizing the urgency of the Church's response to the evil of racism in our country, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has called forth an Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism. Cardinal Wuerl wrote this pastoral letter for the Church of Washington to address the crisis of racism and how the Church through its healing mission confronts racism by reconnecting us to God's plan for our unity in Christ and the ministry of reconciliation.

In the Scriptures, we find that in the perfect plan of God, we were created in his image: "God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him, male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27) Every human being shares this same identity and dignity, and we are all called by grace to a relationship with God and each other. God created each and every one of us in love; this is the source of our human dignity, and he called us to be a family.

Racism is discrimination against another person based upon their race or ethnicity. It is a denial of human dignity because it denies the basic equality and dignity of all people before God. Racism is a sin. It is a sin that claims that some human beings are inherently superior and others inferior because of race. Racism offends God by denying the goodness of his creation, and it is a sin against each other through denying that certain persons are created in the image of God. Racism can be expressed personally through our own prejudices, and it can be expressed socially and institutionally through discriminatory political or economic structures. Racism violates the plan of God.

God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to reconcile us to God and each other. Jesus calls us to new life in him, and through the sacraments in the Church, we share this new life in the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we live in the same Spirit. In Jesus Christ we find our truest identity as children of one Father; through Christ we are one family.

Conformed to Christ, we are called to respond to his call by acknowledging our sins, asking forgiveness, and seeking with the help of his grace to amend our lives. This means that we must examine how, in our own hearts, we have held onto hateful things. Our response of faith through repentance entails a fundamental change in the attitude of our hearts. Experiencing forgiveness, we are each uniquely loved by God with an infinite love. We are called to communion in Christ to love each other as he loves us and to forgive as he forgives us.

Drawing our life from Christ and transformed in his love, we participate in his mission of reconciliation and healing. In his pastoral letter, Cardinal Wuerl acknowledges how the Church has been affected by the sins of racism, and he gives thanks for the steadfast faith of African-Americans and immigrants who through great suffering have been witnesses to the new life in Christ. In concluding his

letter, Cardinal Wuerl highlights how the Archdiocese of Washington has worked throughout history to bear witness and is working hard today to overcome the challenge of racism. Each of us bears a personal responsibility in our relationships and in a public way to be educated and raise awareness about racism and, in a spirit of encounter and dialogue, promote justice and peace.

Life in Christ is a mission to live a life of holiness; it is to live a life which, on our own, exceeds our abilities. With the grace of Christ and the strength of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we can trust in God to accomplish through us more than we could ask for or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). Through Christ, we are called to envision the holy city not built with human hands.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL - 1

Priest:

Confident of his love and mercy, we turn to the Father of all humanity with our needs and petitions.

Deacon or Lector:

For the Holy Catholic Church, that inspired by Our Lord's call to preach the good news of salvation to all people, we may share the love of Jesus Christ to all people, regardless of race. Let us pray to the Lord.

For civil authorities, that those in authority in our civil society may act to bring about justice for all and a peaceful society where all are valued and respected. Let us pray to the Lord.

For all those who have been harmed by racism, that knowing the power of the Gospel, they may be brought healing and relief. Let us pray to the Lord.

For a renewed sense of the dignity of every human person, from the smallest child in the womb to the sick and suffering, and their right to full and equal participation in society. Let us pray to the Lord.

For all those who have died, especially the victims of racially-motivated crime, that they may see the loving face of their Lord for eternity. Let us pray to the Lord.

Priest:

Heavenly Father, we are all your children, made in your image and likeness. Hear the prayers we bring before you and answer them if they be in accord with Your will. We ask this, through Christ, Our Lord.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL – 2 (USCCB)

For an end to the violence perpetrated by harsh words, deadly weapons, or cold indifference. May our homes, our nation, and countries around the world become havens of peace, let us pray to the Lord.

For the grace to see every human being as a child of God, regardless of race, language or culture, let us pray to the Lord.

For the wisdom to receive the stories and experiences of those different from ourselves and to respond with respect, let us pray to the Lord.

For the strength to teach our children how to resolve differences non-violently and respectfully, and the courage to model it in our own behavior, let us pray to the Lord.

For our faith community, that we may celebrate and welcome the diverse faces of Christ in our worship, our ministries, and our leaders, let us pray to the Lord.

For our faith community, that we may respond boldly to the Holy Spirit's call to act together to end violence and racism, let us pray to the Lord.

For healing and justice for all those who have experienced violence and racism, let us pray to the Lord.

For the protection of all police and first responders who risk their lives daily to ensure our safety; for fair and just policing that will promote peace and wellbeing in all our neighborhoods, let us pray to the Lord.

For our public officials, that they will strive to work for fair education, adequate housing, and equal opportunities for employment for all, let us pray to the Lord.

For our parish, that we may cultivate welcome, extend hospitality, and encourage the participation of people of all cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds, let us pray to the Lord.

For the courage to have difficult conversations about racism, and for a better appreciation of how our words and actions – or even our silence – can impact our communities, let us pray to the Lord.

For solidarity in our global human family, that we may work together to protect those who are most vulnerable and most in need, let us pray to the Lord.