



Introductory Statement from Archbishop Gregory's discussion with Notre Dame students

In one of the closing scene of Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, Captain Thomas Fitzgerald fires upon the fortress in Lomboko on the Galinas Bay in Sierra Leone destroying the place from which slaves were loaded onto ships headed to the Americas. This emotional moment is cathartic for most of the audience. The business of slavery is now universally considered unsavory! However, the enduring bequest of slavery in the United States still leaves a misery that is not so easily dismissed. That legacy needs reconciliation and the Catholic Church must exercise her mission as the repository of reconciliation.

The Bishops of the United States have issued a number of pastoral statements on the topic of racism and racial intolerance. Over the years, these statements have grown increasingly direct and forceful. They have also revealed a changing focus from charity toward People of Color to a serious realization of the personal and universal consequence that slavery has left on this nation and all others as well as those who were participants in the business of slavery.

Unfortunately, in the 19th century American Catholic bishops chose not to take a formal joint position condemning slavery fearing, perhaps that such a choice would result in dividing Catholic people along the extraordinarily complex matters that would eventually result in a four-year civil war dividing the nation into warring camps. Some might suggest that the Catholic Church, immigrant community that it then was, could not have chosen another path. Who will ever know the numbers of African-American Catholics we might have had, if the Catholic Church had publicly and enthusiastically chosen to be identified with the anti-slavery movement?

After the Civil War when the American Bishops began addressing the needs of the newly freed Black Americans, some were generous in their language:

"I think it is our most urgent duty to discuss the future status of the Negro . . . Four million of these unfortunate beings are thrown on our charity, and they silently but eloquently appeal to us for help. We have a golden opportunity to reap a harvest of souls, which neglected, may not return."

Archbishop Martin Spalding 1866.



Sadly, the American Bishops' words proved more generous than effective in reaping that harvest of souls. The sentiments, as noble as they sounded did not yet see racism as a malady that disgraces both those who hate as well as those who are hated.

Nearly a century later, at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the American Bishops issued a document disavowing segregation, but urging prudence to bring about the end of segregation. The statement was issued at a moment in time when the social forces of our society were in the midst of radical change. The Bishops, as pastors, urged a judicious path toward integration. They had not yet felt the urgency that the civil rights movement would impose on the nation:

“We may well deplore a gradualism that is merely a cloak for inaction. But we equally deplore rash impetuosity that would sacrifice the achievements of decades in ill-timed and ill-considered ventures.”

USA Bishops' Statement 14 November, 1958

Clearly by 1968, the mood of the country and that of the Bishops had changed. Civil unrest was common place and the threat of violence was growing more certain, especially after the assassination of Dr. King. Now the Bishops began to speak with a persistence and a passion that was new and greatly needed:

“There is no place for complacency and inertia. The hour is late and the need is critical. Let us act while there is still time for collaborative peaceful solutions. We must show concern, we must give ground for hope. In the name of God, our Father—and we do not lightly invoke His name – let us prove to all men that we are truly aware that we are a single human family on the unity of which depends our best hope for our progress and our peace.”

USA Bishops' Statement 25 April, 1968.

However, in 1979, under the courageous leadership of Bishop Joseph A. Francis, S.V.D., the fifth African-American Bishop in the nation, the Catholic Bishops confronted racism



head-on with the issuance of *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. This landmark document dared to challenge the Church itself to conversion and healing from the sin of racism.

“How great, therefore, is that sin of racism which weakens the Church’s witness as the universal sign of unity among all peoples! How great the scandal given by racist Catholics who would make the body of Christ, the Church, a sign of racial oppression! Yet all too often the Church in our country has been for many a ‘white Church,’ a racist institution.”

As we remain at the threshold of a still the new millennium of Christianity, we stand at a hopeful juncture where the Church can fulfill the nobility of its mission and live out the dignity of its documented history. Those in leadership in tomorrow’s Church will be judged by a much higher standard – one that is rooted in the Gospel and the Catholic Church’s ability and obligation to reconcile and heal the sins of humanity as well as those that may still lodge in the heart of the Church herself. There is no turning back!

Washington Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, S.L.D.