

The Church & Racism

Racism is a continuing, ugly presence in our world today. As the Church we uphold fundamental values regarding the dignity of all human beings. These values are the seeds to the demise of racism and we must speak and witness to their truth ever more clearly.

In 1988 the then Pontifical Commission "Justice and Peace" published a document called *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society*.

In September 2001, on the occasion of a world conference on racism (held at Durban), the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace decided to republish the 1988 document with the addition of an introductory update.

Points from both the update and the 1988 document on racism are presented in this edition of Landmarks.

The increase of racism

Today's increasing globalisation means that countries, economies and cultures have found a new interdependence. The planet has 'shrunk' considerably. Multi-ethnicity and exchanges between cultures have become 'social facts'.

Paradoxically, there has also been a growing degree of ethnic violence, nationalistic wars and barbaric crimes committed in the name of a tightly defined 'group'.

This paradox has many causes. One can point, for instance, to:

- Fears of a loss of identity in the face of globalisation and socio-economic inequalities.
- The fall of the Berlin Wall which released nationalistic resentments previously kept in check by political suppression;
- Borders inherited from colonial times which did not respect the identity of peoples;
- Abuse of human rights in societies which are socially disintegrating.

Tragically, conflicts due to racism have not improved since 1988. In fact, in many ways the situation has become worse. True, we can rejoice at the end of apartheid in South Africa, but we now have racist massacres ('ethnic cleansing') to deal with. We can be glad

that slavery laws have been abolished, yet forms of slavery are still practised among some ethnic groups and in new forms such as the exploitation of children, prostitutes and illegal immigrants. In addition, anti-Semitic prejudices continue to persist in the world.

The story in her tears

I went to hear a public talk given by a Jewish woman, a holocaust survivor.

Her talk - which was an account of her experiences at the hands of the Nazis - began like no other talk I have ever heard.

She stood at the microphone, her notes in front of her, as if to speak. But before she could utter a single sentence, she began to cry. Her tears came from a deep, grieving part of her soul.

She did not apologize for her tears or try to cover them up. She simply allowed them to run their course, then calmly proceeded to explain to her audience the source of her tears: the unspeakable cruelty human beings are capable of inflicting on one another because of differences of race.

When I think back to that talk, what I remember most is her tears; tears that told a story which must never be forgotten.

Purify the Heart

Conversion of heart and a just social order

Murder, envy, pride and folly begin in the human heart. The heart must be purified and filled with a spirit of love, openness and solidarity. This is the unceasing message of the Church in its constant appeal for personal conversion. In war the 'other' becomes the enemy. The radical commandment of Christianity is to love that enemy and to meet evil with good.

Equally part of the Church's message are the structural necessities of justice. For example, efforts to introduce strong penalties for racist actions (such as the genocide in Yugoslavia and Rwanda) are a vital collective sign of fundamental values.

The Church asks for pardon

It would be wonderful to be able to say that Christians have always lived by their own teachings of love and solidarity, however sadly this is not the case as witnessed by the many transgressions by Christians in the course of history.

In the Jubilee Year of 2000, Pope John Paul formally and publicly asked for pardon in the name of the Church for those acts and omissions which have encouraged or perpetuated discrimination against particular groups of people around the world.

Where evils of the past survive the perpetrators, they can become a burden on the conscience of later generations. A purification of memory is need in order to be able to move forward in the present. This means letting go resentments inherited from the past and establishing a renewed foundation for moral action in the present.

Pardon is the path to reconciliation

In asking for pardon, the Church addresses its own life. However it also hopes to set an example for political leaders and peoples to follow, especially those who are caught up in tragic conflicts fuelled by hatred and the memory of ancient wounds.

Reconciliation that leads to peace requires forgiveness in human hearts. Without forgiveness, wounds continue to fester and end up fuelling a cycle of destruction in succeeding generations.

To talk about 'forgiveness' in the face of the enormity of past tragedies may sound like folly. In fact, forgiveness is neither weakness nor cowardice. The Church proclaims the way of pardon because of an unshakeable confidence in the power of God's love to heal and to bring forth new life and love from the deepest hurts.

Think ... Talk

As a Christian and as a citizen, what can I do to welcome refugees to our nation's shores?

The teaching of the Church

All persons, of whatever race, have equal dignity. Science, philosophy, ethics and the world's great religions solidly support this principle. The Christian faith respects this intuition and reinforces it with its own affirmation that God is at the origin of humankind. According to biblical revelation, man and woman are created by God in the image of God. 'The bond between the human person and the Creator provides the basis of his or her dignity and fundamental inalienable rights of which God is the guarantor.' With these rights come duties towards others. No individual, state or human institution can ever reduce a person to the status of an object. Cf. The Church and Racism (1988), n.19

Increased mobility demands greater openness

Wars, natural disasters and forced displacement have accelerated the movement of peoples in recent years. The Catholic Church is aware of the problems and social angst involved in this global phenomenon and has a special concern for migrants and refugees. Increased mobility requires greater openness from those who receive refugees. The Pope dedicates an annual message to migrants and refugees and always encourages people - especially Christians - to be generous in their welcome and to recognise the cultural riches which migrants and refugees bring with them.

Forgive from the **Heart**

A culture of peace

The Church urges the international community to actively opt for a 'culture of peace'; a culture which does not resort to arms to solve problems and works towards the end of the arms industry.

Local Churches have a part to play here in promoting messages and actions of peace. Likewise governments must establish solid structures that will withstand the uncertainties of politics and facilitate freedom and security for their people. Forms of mediation should be encouraged and existing structures such as the United Nations strengthened. Such structures are absolutely essential, yet on their own they are not enough to build lasting peace. Only the path of forgiveness makes peace possible.

Forgiveness, truth, justice

As an act of gratuitous love, forgiveness has its own demands. First of all, the evil done must be acknowledged and, as far as possible, corrected. For evil to

be acknowledged we need to know the truth about a situation. Procedures that seek the truth are essential, but delicate – they must not become a thirst for vengeance.

As well as truth there must be justice; a justice that respects the dignity of the person at all times. Forgiveness does not do away with the need for reparation.

As far as possible, reparation should restore things to the way they were before the injustice was committed. If this is not possible, reparation can be made through compensation and the offering of an apology or expression of regret to the victim.

It is not the place of the Church to propose a technical solution to a complex problem, however, the Holy See does emphasise that the need for reparation reinforces the moral obligation of wealthy countries to assist those developing countries whose peoples suffer poverty, hunger and illiteracy.

According to the Old Testament, the chosen people of Israel were aware of a special bond with God. They also affirmed God's covenant with the entire human race (Gen 9:11) and that all people are called to salvation (Gen 12:3).

Building on this foundational biblical story, the New Testament tells us that Christ died and rose for the salvation of all people. Christ's resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost ushered in a new humanity: all social divisions and barriers gave way to a liberating unity. Those who embraced the gospel experienced themselves to be forgiven, freed and reconciled. They formed 'one body, one Spirit in Christ', and adopted a lifestyle marked by mutual respect and love.

That same Spirit-filled liberation is offered to Christ's followers today. As the Church we are called to be a sign to the whole world that it is possible to live as one human family, united as brothers and sisters in God's love.

A society with a profound sense of human equality has a real chance of achieving peace and overcoming the destructive gulfs between the rich and the poor.

See *The Church and Racism* (1988), 19,22

Equal in the eyes of God

The conviction that all people are equal before God is the most radical affirmation of the human person. From this premise a person is protected from every manipulation which seeks to justify the servitude of the weakest.

If all persons are created by God, then they all have the same origin and are bound together in a profound and fundamental way. Whatever differences and dispersions have divided people in history, they are destined to form one family in God. Equality is not uniformity.

Within the one human family there are diverse gifts and complementary qualities of different cultures. There must be room for racial and cultural groups to develop their uniqueness, while respecting the common good. No one group can ever boast a natural superiority over others nor trample upon the basic human rights of others.

See *The Church and Racism* (1988), n.19, 23

Think ... Act

Drawing on your personal resources (e.g. your initiative, ideas, possessions, income, friendships, faith) what can you do to promote a culture of peace?

Act **Justly**

Education and the struggle against racism

The roots of racism are found in prejudice and ignorance. These are the fruits of sin, but also of faulty and inadequate education. 'The illiterate is a starved spirit,' said Pope Paul VI (Popularum Progressio, 1967). The Church promotes international cooperative efforts aimed at assisting the poorer nations to educate youth with a view to the future.

To eradicate racism, education everywhere must be about teaching people to become ever more human, to be with and for others. We must teach people – especially our young – core values such as the unity of the human race, the dignity of persons, respect for human rights and the solidarity which binds all members of the human family. Without education in moral values the path to peace is doomed. It is the duty of politicians, educators, the media, families and churches to contribute to this formation.

Think ... Talk

What ethnic and racial groups are present in your own extended family?

In what way(s) has racism touched your own life?

Do you harbour any reservations towards people of a particular ethnic background? What experiences have influenced these attitudes of yours?

Bring all these reflections to prayer.

The media in human rights education

Powerful developments in social communications are accompanied by grave responsibilities. Those responsible for disseminating information must never forget their duty to the common good. The monopoly held by a few countries on the cultural 'industries' relating to information technologies and their ability to promote their products (which carry implicit value-systems) all over the globe can be a contributing factor to a loss of cultural identity in those who are on the receiving end.

Religion in human rights education

The Church insists that religion, and the Christian faith especially, has an irreplaceable role to play in human rights education. Individually and together, the world's religious communities must show that their faith convictions inspire peace, justice and liberty.

A new form of slavery?

Since 1988, two global divides have deepened. One of these, the tragedy of poverty, is widely recognised. The other attracts less criticism. It concerns the unborn child and activities such as the experimentation on human embryos. At risk here is a new form of racism, the creation of a 'sub-category of human beings' to be used by certain others. This would be a new and terrible form of slavery. Governments and the scientific community must vigilantly protect the dignity of every human life.

Positive discrimination'

The 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination envisages special measures to further the advancement of indigenous peoples and minorities (e.g. a system of quotas to ensure places in schools and universities, access to bank loans, etc). Such policy remains controversial. The Church considers such measures to be legitimate in so far as they encourage respect for human rights and provided they are temporary measures which are not kept in force once their objectives have been achieved.

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Landmarks

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The content is not a comprehensive commentary but a simple introduction to the documents of the Church.

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