

OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS
PRESENTATION TO THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CINCINNATI
(Preaching on Racism)
April 2021
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I want to return to an image I used to open my first presentation. You will recall that I stated that one of the graces and privileges of being called to the vocation of Holy Orders as priests and bishops is the opportunity to celebrate the Most Holy Eucharist with God's faithful. On any given Sunday, a Mass celebrant can hopefully look out from the altar of sacrifice and see a small glimpse of what I shall call the "Face of Church". I hope that in attendance are women and men, young and old, people from different ethnic heritages and cultural traditions. I rejoice in seeing the followers of Jesus Christ united in prayer. We adore and worship our Lord together, and we can point to this as an indication of our unity. It is a powerful sign that brings people together, a powerful grace intrinsically connected with our Lord Jesus Christ. It is to this "Face of the Church" that you and I, by virtue of our ordination as priests and bishops, are tasked to break open the Word of God and preach regarding many challenges. One such challenge is the evil and sin of racism, which blemishes some of the unity in our Sunday celebrations and manifests its presence in our Church and in our society. Our recent USCCB pastoral letter against racism entitled *Open Wide Our Heart: The Enduring Call to Love* states, "*Racism arises when – either consciously or unconsciously – a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.*" *Racism has for far too long prevented us from FULLY being the unified family God has created us and calls us to be.*

Before I continue, I want to state two things clearly. First, I am not an anthropologist, a sociologist, or a psychologist. There are those more competent in these disciplines than I who could give insights from these perspectives on racism. In this presentation, I will be approaching racism primarily from my own experience and competence, which is as a pastor of souls, a disciple of Jesus Christ, and a Black Roman Catholic Bishop in the United States. Second, racism is a complex and multifaceted challenge, and no one presentation, such as this one, can capture its full tragic and painful reality. There is always more that can be said, but I hope the information I present helps you to preach against racism. These two things acknowledged, I would like to address two questions: 1. Why is it necessary that we preach on the evil and sin of racism; and 2. As we preach on racism, what needs to be our focus?

Why must we preach on the evil and sin of racism? First, we must preach on racism because it is an evil and a sin that is an ongoing challenge for people in our Church and our country. *OWOH* acknowledges that racism still exists among us by stating, *“Every racist act – every such comment, every joke, every disparaging look as a reaction to the color or skin, ethnicity, or place of origin – is a failure to acknowledge another person as a brother or sister, created in the image of God. In these and in many other such acts, the sin of racism persists in our lives, in our country, and in our world.”* The very tragic and painful events within recent years and months have brought racism into focus once again. Considering these circumstances, to not preach on racism is a missed opportunity to give guidance and direction to those entrusted to our pastoral care. Silence from the pulpit might be equated with the sin of omission in the face of evil. In times such as these, people need to hear and want to hear direction from the Church. Let me share

with you a personal experience in this regard. In keeping with the recommendation in *OWOH*, I have traveled the country as the Chair of the USCCB *Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism* attending Listening Sessions on racism in various dioceses. One of the consistent things that I have heard from some in attendance at the Listening Sessions is the lamentation that, with all that has happened and is happening, parishioners still rarely if ever hear homilies on racism. One woman's comments were particularly poignant. After the tragic events that happened in Charlottesville, VA, in August of 2017, she went to Mass the following Sunday, hoping that the situation would in some way be acknowledged or addressed during the homily. She saw this as a 'teachable moment' to convey Church teaching on racism to all gathered. Any such reference would also comfort her. However, it was never mentioned in the homily. As a testimony to her faith, she said that she hoped then for a mention in the Prayers of the Faithful, which she would have readily accepted as enough for the moment. Again, there was no mention in the Prayers of the Faithful. There was no mention, no prayer, nothing regarding a significant event in the life of our country regarding racism. She was broken hearted. My brothers, one of the reasons it is necessary that we preach on racism is because for challenge or comfort we must lay before those entrusted to our pastoral care the truths of Church teaching regarding the sin of racism, just as we do against other sins and challenges of our time. The Bishops of the United States in 2012 issued *Preaching the Mystery of Faith: The Sunday Homily (PTMOF)* and state in this document, *"Indeed, the Church in the United States faces a number of challenges that compel us to call for a renewed consideration of the Church's mission to proclaim the Word of God"*, and it goes on to cite racism as one example of such a challenge by stating, *"Although there have been many advances made to overcome the sin of racism, we still have attitudes of prejudice that violate the dignity of the human person."*

Many people, knowingly or unknowingly, are looking for guidance and direction to steer their own hearts and actions with regard to overcoming racism. *PTMOF* states, ". . .the homilist is speaking to people who are, at least to some degree, searching for Jesus Christ and the meaning that the Gospel can give to their lives. This is what ultimately draws them to the Eucharist, no matter how fragile their faith and understanding might be. The homilist, therefore, addresses disciples who – like their spiritual ancestors on the road to Emmaus, may be tending, in varying degrees, in the wrong direction, confused and unsure." We cannot allow those entrusted to our pastoral care to wander off in the wrong direction without providing them with the direction that the Church gives in challenging matters such as racism. *PTMOF* states, "The Church's urgent call for respect for human life, particularly for those who are most vulnerable, the call for justice for the poor and the migrant, the condemnation of oppression and violations of human and religious freedom, and the rejection of violence as an ordinary means of solving conflicts, are some of the controversial issues that need to be a part of the Church's catechesis and to find their way in an appropriate manner into the Church's liturgical preaching." Racism is manifested in all these issues, and it must be included in our liturgical preaching.

Another reason that we must preach on racism is that racism is not only a challenge on the realm of civil laws, but racism is also more deeply a moral problem. In the realm of civil law, Civil Rights legislation enacted in the 1960s allowed us to make progress in combatting racism, even though there remains much work to do. However, as we work to continue to enact civil legislation to end the perpetuation of racism, we preachers of the Word of God must understand that racism is not only a struggle in civil law but is more tragically a spiritual and moral challenge; it is a matter of the heart. *OWOH* states, "Racism is a moral problem that

requires a moral remedy – a transformation of the human heart – that compels us to act. . . What is needed, and what we are calling for, is a genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society.” In preaching on racism, we foster this transformation of heart. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace recognized the role that this conversion of heart plays in overcoming racism when it stated, *“In order to. . . eradicate racist behavior of all sorts from our societies as well as the mentalities that lead to it, we must hold strongly to convictions about the dignity of every human person and the unity of the human family. Morality flows from these convictions. Laws can contribute to protecting basic applications of this morality, but they are not enough to change the human heart.”* (*The Church and Racism, 1988, no. 16*) While governments can and must create laws and policies that respect the Civil Rights of people regardless of their race, the aspect of the struggle against racism that the church must foster is a change of human hearts. Jesus stated that from within people, from their hearts come evil thoughts, un-chastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. (*Mk. 17 21-22*) Racism can certainly be added to this list! Therefore, we must preach against racism and root it out not only on the critical level of public policy and civil law, not only on the level of our structures and institutions, but also most importantly on the level of the human heart. We as people of faith, as the Church, and most importantly as preachers of the Word of God, are in the unique position to foster the conversion necessary to overcome racism. Therefore, we must preach on racism because the Church is uniquely qualified to bring the answer to the moral problem that is racism – conversion of hearts.

Let us move now to the second question this presentation addresses which is, ***“As we preach on racism, what needs to be our focus?”*** PTMOF states, “. . .the homilist of today must realize that he is addressing a congregation that is . . .profoundly affected by the surrounding secular agenda and, in many instances, inadequately catechized.” Therefore, the first thing that we must remember when preaching on racism is the strength of the secular agenda, and the reality that in contrast to this secular agenda we must bring a **gospel perspective** and the **teachings of the Church** to bear on the social turmoil surrounding race. We cannot simply echo and repeat some of the secular solutions shouted by various groups, but we must root our response and efforts in the gospel message and Church teaching. In response to the acuteness of the inadequate catechesis on racism, it is important that our preaching and response be grounded in who and what we believe as Church. The bishops of the United States have given us good grounding by stating in *OWOH*, *“As bishops, we unequivocally state that racism is a life issue. Accordingly, we will not cease to speak forcefully against and work toward ending racism.”* Therefore, preaching racism as an attack against the sanctity and dignity of human life, is in my opinion, one of the best approaches to addressing the topic of racism in homilies. *OWOH* states, *“Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and - all too often - hatred.”* Racism is indeed a life issue and must be preached against as such.

Another focus in preaching on racism is that it undercuts our unity as People of God and the Body of Christ. St. Paul very often wrote about the unity to which we are called, such as in Ephesians, Chapter 2 and Colossians, Chapter 3. Revelations

Chapter 7 also speaks of this unity. Jesus prays for our unity in John 17. In addressing and seeking to overcome racism, we must stress what Christians share in common and what profoundly unites us, namely: a common Father; a common Savior; the one Good Shepherd; a common redemption through the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord; sharing the same gift of the Holy Spirit; and a common human dignity. What unites us make fellowship possible. Racism is an affront to the unity of our country, our Church, and our church parishes. In the church as well as in society, the goal must be reconciliation between races. We must foster a conversion of heart to greater appreciation of what unites us.

Another factor that we must remember when preaching on racism is, as is stated in *OWOH*, *"Most people would not consider themselves to be racist. A person might admit to being prejudiced but certainly not racist."* We must recognize that when preaching on racism to audiences of European Americans, in the minds of our hearers to be guilty or accused of racism is experienced as the moral equivalent of being guilty of one of the lowest forms of human depravity, to be guilty of a sin against charity and justice. Therefore, the reaction on the part of some people, no matter what is said, can be instinctively defensive. Addressing racism in homilies is daunting because current issues surrounding racism are charged with emotion and, unfortunately, politics and political stances. In preaching on racism, we are being pastoral, not political. We must preach against racism because as Pope Benedict XVI noted in his Lenten reflections for 2012, *"We must not remain silent before evil. I am thinking of those Christians who, out of human regard or purely personal convenience, adapt to the prevailing mentality, rather than warning their brothers and sisters against ways of thinking and acting that are contrary to the truth and that do not follow the path of goodness."* Preaching on racism will elicit a negative response from some, but we must nonetheless urge people to follow the

path of charity, justice, peace, the teaching of the Church, and the love commandment of Jesus Christ.

As we preach against racism, we must remember that along with preaching the challenge, we must also give people hope at the same time. As *PTMOF* states, “*The need for repentance does not mean that homilies should simply berate people for their failures. Such an approach is not usually effective, for concentrating on our sinfulness, unaccompanied by the assurance of grace, usually produces either resentment or discouragement. Preaching the Gospel entails challenge but also encouragement, consolation, support, and compassion.*” Our task is to contextualize the sin of racism as a leprosy of the soul that we must acknowledge so that God can forgive and cleanse. God’s mercy seeks to forgive and restore. God’s grace is able to transform our hearts and offer us a new and right way of seeing one another so that we might better reverence and love one another. God is able to free us from all the snares that keep us divided. Racism is not the unpardonable sin; it can be pardoned and overcome. Therefore, we must remind people of the grace that is available to overcome the sin of racism. As we preach on racism, our goal is the conversion of hearts through God’s grace, not the hardening of hearts because in our preaching we have been only accusatory or judgmental.

As we preach on racism, allow me to encourage us to stay focused on what we can do in accordance with Church teaching and gospel values to dismantle racism. As an example of how we might lose focus, I want to address conversations that are taking place regarding “Black Lives Matter”. Rooting ourselves in the teaching of the Church regarding the life and dignity of the human person as well as other social teachings, I believe it is possible to support the ***sentiment*** expressed by the phrase “Black Lives Matter” without supporting an organization of the same name, which

promotes and fosters things contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. Some use the controversy surrounding Black Lives Matter to discredit any efforts regarding racism. We must not in our preaching fall into the trap of this misplaced focus. While questions surrounding BLM, both the phrase and the global foundation, have their place for discussion, we cannot fall into the trap of allowing this distraction to be an obstacle to what we need to do to make this time in history a defining moment regarding dismantling racism in our Church and country. If we keep our focus on responding constructively to dismantling the evil of racism and not focus on things that are used to interrupt, stifle, or even end discussion and action, we can forge our way into a new reality of race relationships in our country. Jesus Christ has sent us as fishers of men, and we want to catch souls, not the needless *'red herrings'* that are always snapping at our lines. Do not let your homilies get lost in distraction on issues that arise and prevent real encounters that will heal racism.

In conclusion, and for my final point on what is our focus on preaching on racism, I would like to use a text from the liturgy of the Church. If we embrace *lex orandi, lex credendi*, then this text is particularly one that calls us to preach and act against racism. I began this presentation by stating that our celebrations of the Eucharist can be and should be an expression of the "Face of the Church". There is a line from the Eucharistic Prayer for the Church on the Path of Unity that provides a wonderful image for which we should strive. The prayer states, *"Strengthen the bond of unity between the faithful and the pastors of your people, together with N. our Pope, N. our Bishop and the whole Order of Bishops, **that in a world torn by strife your people may shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and concord.**"* If we want to dismantle racism, we must examine how well we ourselves are also striving in our own lives to be this prophetic sign of unity and

concord that we are called to foster in those entrusted to our pastoral care by preaching about racism. *PTMOF* states, “A good homily is an occasion to find healing precisely through confidence in Christ Jesus. This is why it is crucial that the homilist be a man of faith, capable of making the reality of his faith visible and radiant. Catholic laity want their homilist to be passionate and excited about what he is preaching, and to deliver homilies that are heartfelt and drawn from the depth of his own faith and commitment.” As those entrusted with preaching, our efforts to preach against racism involve: first, being something ourselves in seeking to convert our own hearts regarding racism; second, saying something by preaching gospel values and the teaching of the Church on racism to others; and finally doing something for others by constructively working to dismantle racism as it exists in our parishes, in our Church, and in our country. To the extent that we are seeking to accomplish these things ourselves and assist others in doing the same, we are becoming a prophetic sign of unity and concord that points us all to the new creation. The “Face of the Church” as the Body of Christ is that community of racially differentiated believers who have found a profound unity with one another in Christ, and are striving to live together in love, justice, and peace. This is the gospel antidote to racism, and the origin and the goal of our efforts to preach on racism. Thank you for your interest and attention.