

Catholic Social Thought and Racial Solidarity

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In 1991, Rodney King asked, "Why can't we all just get along?" Since then, we have seen multiple police shootings of black adults and children, the brutal racist murders of nine churchgoers in Charleston, neo-Nazi marchers in Charlottesville and even white supremacists menacing the halls of our nation's Capitol building. The mere mention of the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and numerous other people of color who have become victims of brutality remind us how deeply racism stains our society. "It is a wound in humanity's side that mysteriously remains open."^[1]

The Catholic Church has repeatedly identified racism, white supremacy, and neo-Nazism as serious sins^[2] and has consistently contended that eradicating them in ourselves and in society and its structures requires *conversion* on the part of all of us. A great deal of attention is paid—rightfully—to changes in personal and collective attitudes and behaviors, recognizing privilege (in its various forms), truth-telling about our collective past, and to making long overdue progress toward racial healing and reconciliation. Too little attention, however, is paid to the equally important economic, social, and political tasks demanded by racial solidarity and needed to end institutionalized racism.^[3]

Pope Saint John Paul II underscored the urgency of connecting action for justice to faith in a term reflecting his experience with a famous Polish union: the **duty of solidarity**. For him, solidarity meant, not just attitudinal changes and love of neighbor, but the structural responses demanded by Gospel love and involving fundamental societal changes. He wrote bluntly, "Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue."^[4] He explained in an often-quoted passage:

This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because *we are all really responsible for all*.^[5]

This solidarity takes concrete form, John Paul wrote, in how we live as individuals and families, use resources, conduct our civic activity, make economic and political decisions, and commit ourselves nationally and internationally.^[6]

If societal systems promote or condone racism and inequality, then our faith response in solidarity has to be structural as well as personal. We must do justice as well as charity. Specific actions directed toward imbedded racial injustices include: (1) reforming existing institutions like the criminal justice system (including policing), underfunded public school systems, unjust employment practices, income and wealth inequality, inadequate family support and welfare programs, *de facto* residential segregation, and regressive tax systems; (2) strengthening graced institutions and initiatives such as legal services and public defenders, civil rights organizations, community organizing, affirmative action, fair and affordable housing, collective bargaining, interracial coalitions, community reinvestment, political reform, targeted philanthropy, and alternatives to incarceration; and (3) developing new institutions and structures to right the past wrongs of slavery, Jim Crow, and *de facto* segregation and privilege and to create and insure a just, diverse, and equitable future in which no one will "be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."^[7]

The above is obviously a long and ambitious list of reforms, and any one of the three categories mentioned might require the energies of a lifetime or more of concerted effort. But we must not be discouraged by the enormity of the undertaking; the best strategy is to divide the overall project into achievable and practical tasks on the local level. One practical way to promote racial reconciliation and solidarity simultaneously is to bring together people of diverse races to work together, focused not explicitly on racism in the abstract, but rather on changing the structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality, such as our broken schools, overcrowded prisons, unjust tax systems, and inadequate health systems and services. Taking advantage of the synergies associated with such tasks promising mutual benefits may just have the power to create the momentum we need to

amplify our progress toward greater racial justice and solidarity in the years (and even generations) to come.

[1] Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, November 3, 1988, no. 33.

[2] Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo President of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Bishop Frank Dewane, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, "We stand against the evil of racism, white supremacy and neo-Nazism." August 13, 2017 statement in the wake of events in Charlottesville at <http://www.usccb.org/news/2017/17-144.cfm>

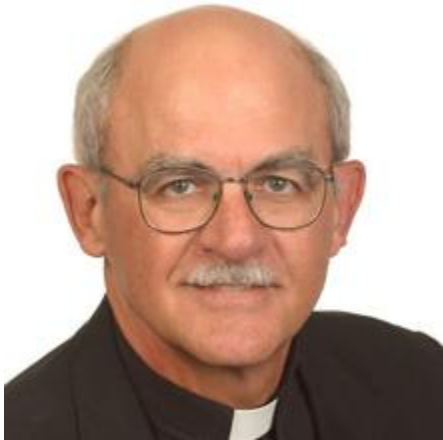
[3] Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, November 3, 1988, no. 9.

[4]. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 40.

[5]. *Ibid.*, no. 38 (emphasis added).

[6] *Ibid.*, no. 47.

[7] Martin Luther King, Jr., from his "I have a dream" speech on the Washington mall, August 28, 1963.

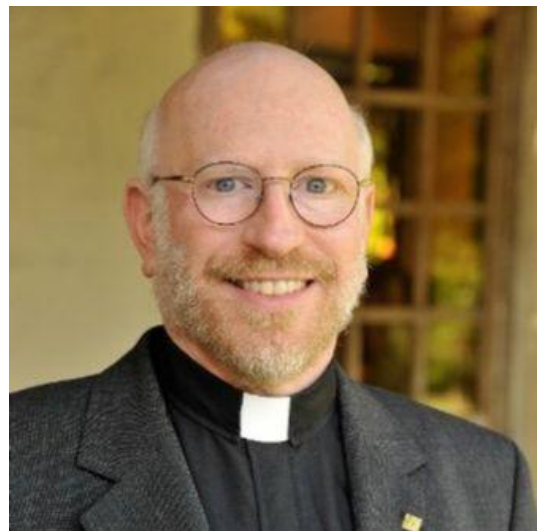


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