



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

September 9, 2020 - Feast of St. Peter Claver

RACISM IS A LIFE ISSUE

By Barbara Sella, Associate Director for Respect Life and Social Concerns

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has formally condemned racism in four pastoral statements: in 1958, 1968, 1979, and in 2018 with *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love—A Pastoral Letter against Racism*. Yet never has the American Church been as engaged in open and difficult conversations about racism as it has in 2020. At the USCCB, in dioceses, and in parishes, Catholics are examining the many ways that racism has harmed fellow citizens and distorted America's laws and institutions.

Open Wide Our Hearts points to the experience of Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans, but recent events direct us especially to the experiences and insights of Black Catholic leaders. They are crucial to properly understanding the challenges our nation faces and the solutions it should embrace.

Last month, for example, the USCCB held its annual Diocesan Pro-Life Leadership Conference, at which Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, chairman of the USCCB Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, spoke about racism as a life issue. He explained how racism robs people of color of abundant life (John 10:10) by perpetuating poverty, poor health care, inadequate education, etc. But racism also “corrupts the soul” of perpetrators, thus depriving them of abundant life. Reading *Open Wide Our Hearts* (and its study guide), he emphasized, is an essential starting point for Catholics who wish to understand the Church's teaching on racism and who strive for the conversion of hearts and minds.

Bishop Fabre was followed by Danielle Brown, Associate Director of the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, who outlined the many steps dioceses can take to convert hearts and restore right relationships. Ms. Brown placed special emphasis on uniting pro-life and social justice ministries so that the fullness of the Church's teaching on respect for human life can be made manifest.

At EWTN, radio hosts Gloria Purvis and Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers have been discussing the Catholic response to racism on their radio program, *Morning Glory*. They encourage all Catholics to learn about African American history, for example, by reading *From Slave to Priest*, the biography of Fr. Augustine Tolton, the first Black priest in the American Catholic Church. Because no American seminary would admit a man of his race, he studied in Rome and was ordained in 1886 in the Archbasilica of St. John Lateran. In 2019, Fr. Tolton was declared “Venerable” and his cause for sainthood is advancing.

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This past July, the University of Notre Dame hosted “Racism Is a Life Issue Panel Discussion” (available on YouTube), with Catholics Gloria Purvis and G. Marcus Cole, Dean of the Notre Dame Law School, along with other prominent Black Christians. Their powerful observations, and the African American history books they recommend, are vital to understanding the past and building a more just and peaceful future.

Black Catholics are a treasure of the Church. Discriminated against even by their fellow Catholics, they have remained faithful, generation after generation. They have fostered unity and love for the Eucharist when racism threatened their daily lives. What would America look like today if previous generations had listened to the wisdom of Black Catholics and other Black Christians, who first recognized that the grave sin of racism distorts all relations and all institutions? What would America look like today if the inherent dignity of every human life were truly respected by all?

Today’s racial conflicts can seem intractable or likely to devolve into greater chaos. But Black Catholics and Christians are leading the way to conversion and reconciliation, to justice and peace—if only others will follow. Venerable Augustine Tolton, pray for us all.