

HEALING THE RACIAL DIVIDE – WHAT WILL IT TAKE

By Sr. Brenda Walsh, Racine Dominican

In the past some efforts have been made to address racism. Today, many more civic organizations and faith communities seem to have a growing awareness of the need to address racism in its many forms. In our Racine area, a taskforce was established called “Coming Together Racine” to look at the state of our community in terms of racial equity. The vision established by the group is to “create a genuine interracial community where all people have equality of voice and access to resources and opportunities.” A community-wide approach was taken to address the issues and to make systemic change in response to the needs identified. Crossroads Anti-racism Organizing and Training has taken a lead role in facilitating gatherings and in training to address racism. Our Racine Dominican Community has established a taskforce to address the issue of racism.

HOW DO WE DEFINE RACISM?

It is important to have a common definition of racism in order to define our goals. In the past, racism was understood as bigotry and prejudice. Today our understanding goes well beyond that definition. It has many different levels – individual attitudes and actions. It implies a belief that one race or group of people is superior to another group. Judgments made by the dominant group will often lead to discrimination and conflict. Racism implies prejudice as well as power and privilege which do not disappear without a deep and prolonged struggle. Some church leaders have called racism the major sin of the 21st century which imprisons and diminishes both the oppressed and the oppressors and hinders full human growth and development for all involved.

The first task is to identify racism at an individual and organizational level. How can we take down the walls that have divided us over the centuries? Will we have the courage to join hands and hearts with others over the long haul, and in so doing to allow the dignity and freedom of all people to flourish? It is more than a Black/White issue. It also affects people of other cultures, a growing number of immigrants who have come to our shores and a very large Latino population. The United Nations has declared “preference based on race, color or national origin cannot be perpetuated and must be eradicated.”

The issue is gaining prominence again. It appears that there is a growing fear behind racism because of the changing demographics in the US. They predict that in 2050, Minorities will make up more than 50% of the population. Hispanic Americans, African Americans and many other cultures will far surpass the Anglo

population. Our faith calls us to look at this fact in a whole way so that we may be a positive part of creating the world according to God's Design. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free. All are one in Christ." Gal. 3: 28." Many hope that we will have in the not-too-distant future, congregations that will be multi-racial and multi-cultural. To accomplish this, we cannot let the fear element overcome our efforts. Faith communities can lead the way toward racial healing and reconciliation. God created all of us and calls us to unity beyond any distinctions of color or culture. We can view the diversity of God's family as a blessing that mirrors God's design. It's something to be cherished and anticipated with great joy.

WHAT IS NEEDED TO BRING ABOUT RACIAL HARMONY AND HEALING?

First of all, we need to open our minds and hearts to God's call to conversion in our lives. We also need to listen intently to the pain whose lives have been destroyed by poverty and racism and help them define who they are as full members of God's family and not let racist definitions destroy them. It will take all of us working together to create a pluralistic, inclusive and healthy community and let all enjoy the fruits of their efforts. It will restore hope to all aspects of life and benefit both giver and receiver. We need to name, face, denounce and dismantle racism in a holistic way and work with others to create a community that is whole, inclusive and just.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE WAYS TO ADDRESS RACISM?

- ❖ Gather groups together to discuss the issue. One excellent resource to use is Fr. Bryan Massingale's book entitled: "Racism in the Catholic Church"
- ❖ Use Diversity Circles to look at ethnicity, age, gender and race and to foster greater understanding, cooperation and community participation. Check out info@crossradsantiracism.org.
- ❖ Study the relationship between poverty and racism, both locally and globally. Catholic Charities USA has some excellent resources in this regard.
- ❖ Convene a group to study racism. There are many videos that could be used for this purpose. One such video is "True Colors," to be used with a study guide following the viewing.
- ❖ Encourage local clergy and other faith leaders to address racism. Involve children and youth in the study.

- ❖ Get to know and befriend people of other races and cultures. You will be amazed at what God can do through each of us, if we open our minds and hearts to the adventure.
- ❖ Go beyond the church and faith community and help people look at other systems of oppression – in the criminal justice system, in health care delivery and access in employment and many other areas.
- ❖ Ask forgiveness for our own involvement in racial inequities and white power and privilege and make a clear commitment to racial reconciliation. Then we can strengthen our belief that another world is indeed possible.

I conclude with a reference from the US bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, which call us to address the issue at this time:

“There must be no turning back along the road of justice, no sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solution from another age. For we are all children of the age to come, when the first will be last and the last first, when
“Blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all his brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.”

Let us begin today to realign our world more closely with God’s design for all people. May we continue the journey with courage, conviction and hope.