

Racism: Is Your Catholicism Color-Blind?

By Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart



Purpose

Participants will explore the language of racism, and the role of our Catholic faith in addressing the sinful consequences of racism. This session is designed for high school youth and can be done with groups from 12-40 participants. Parents can easily attend this session as well.

Session at a Glance

- 7:00 p.m. Welcome, Forming Groups
- 7:20 p.m. Opening Prayer
- 7:40 p.m. Exploring Racism
Extend the Session: What Other Young People Say (add 30 minutes)
- 8:15 p.m. Announcements and Refreshments
- 8:30 p.m. Good Night!

Extend the Session: Movie and Discussion (2½ hours)

Watch a movie that explores the topic of racism such as “Remember the Titans” (Walt Disney Video, 2001, rated PG). Discuss the lessons of the movie. Divide youth into three groups; have one group discuss the causes for racism, another group discuss the consequences of racism, and a third group discuss some solutions for racism. Invite the different small groups to report the insights of their discussion. Perhaps the group can agree to design some activity or event to continue the exploration of racism with a wider circle.

Note to Leader: If you show the entire movie, you will need to get a license. Contact the Motion Picture Licensing Corporation (www.mplc.com) about getting licensed. The website has very good information about the need for a license to show movies (whether you charge admission or not, whether a non-profit or for-profit organization).

Extend the Session: What Other Young People Say (30 minutes)

In advance of the session, print out the pictures of students and their comments about racism found at the Tomorrow’s Present web site:

http://www.tomorrowspresent.org/youth_programs/Racism.php

http://www.tomorrowspresent.org/youth_programs/RacismQuotesThomasMore.php

http://www.tomorrowspresent.org/youth_programs/RacismQuotesMessmer.php

http://www.tomorrowspresent.org/youth_programs/StJoanAntidaStudentsTalkAboutRacism.php

Let the participants read what their peers have written about racism. Invite them to add their own pictures and comments and submit them to the website as well. To do this,

get signed parental permission forms and use a digital camera to take their pictures. Do not submit names with the pictures; just comments and the name of your parish or high school.

Materials Needed

- Prayer focus: table and cloth, Bible, candle, matches or lightstick, and a risen Jesus cross
- **Resource 1, Language, Definitions, and Examples**, photocopied and cut so that each participant can be given one card or piece of paper
- **Resource 2, Reflections on Racism**, copies for the readers in the Opening Prayer
- **Handout 1, Exploring Racism**, one for each participant (copy double-sided)
- Pens, one for each participant

Prepare in Advance

1. Create cards or quarter pieces of paper, using the four words and the four explanations/examples from **Resource 1, Language, Definitions, and Examples**. These will be used to create four small groups. There needs to be one piece per participant. Each participant will get either a word or a definition.
2. Invite two young people to read, alternately, the quotes during the prayer. Give each a copy of **Resource 2, Reflections on Racism**, so they can practice before the session.
3. *Extend the Session: What Other Young People Say* (optional): Prepare a permission slip for parents to sign, in order to take the pictures of your participants and send them to the Tomorrow's Present website, along with their comments about racism. Images of minors cannot be used without parental permission. Make it clear that you will not be submitting their names to the website, only their pictures and the name of their church or school.

Session Outline

Welcome and Forming Groups (20 minutes)

Welcome the participants as they arrive. Provide a brief introduction to tonight's session by saying:

Although it can be a difficult subject to talk about, we all know that racism still exists and is still a sin that we live with. In this session we are going to take a look at the language that we can use to talk about this serious issue. We will also learn about the ways that we are called to challenge the sin of racism and work to eliminate it.

Give every participant one of the cards (or quarter slips of paper) created from **Resource 1, Language, Definitions, and Examples**. For each term, there is a corresponding explanation. Instruct them to find their partners and form four small groups. Each small group will consist of all the participants who were given the same term, and all of the participants who were given that term's explanation. This activity

forces participants to learn the important differences between some terms that are often thought to be interchangeable.

Once they are in small groups, say:

How difficult or easy was it to match the terms and with their definitions? Get a few responses and then continue.

Talk with each other about the meaning of your group's term. Were any of you familiar with the term already? Did anything surprise you about the meaning?

After a few minutes, ask one person from each group to give an overview of their term and its meaning – in their own words. Ask them not to read from their paper, and ask them to try to give examples that are not on their paper. If they have difficulties, help them out.

Once the four groups have explained their terms, clarify things by asking questions like this:

- What is the difference between racism and racial prejudice?

Get some answers from the participants, then make the following points:

- Racial prejudice is personal and individual. A white person can be prejudiced toward a black person, and a black person can be prejudiced against a white person. An Asian can be prejudiced against Latinos, etc.
- The concept of racism is dependent upon a racial group of dominance, so therefore, a person of a minority group cannot be *racist* against a person from the dominant group. Only a person from the dominant group can be said to use *racist* practices or policies, since the concept of racism by definition implies only practices and policies *that reinforce the superiority of the dominant group*.
- Why are stereotypes bad? Aren't they based on actual reality?

Note to Leader: This definition of racism can be a hard concept for many groups to wrestle with. Do not be surprised if you find some initial resistance to it. If you do experience this, invite the group to sit with the tension for the session. Be prepared to address it again at the end of the session.

Get some answers from the participants. Make the following point:

- Stereotypes are based on the reality of shallow observations. They are not based on in-depth knowledge of another person. When we rely on shallow observations, and use them as an excuse not to get to know a person's individual nature, we miss out. Those who speak of cultural groups by using stereotypes demonstrate their ignorance of that culture. All of us are challenged to get to know individual people so our knowledge of any culture is deeper than the shallow stereotypes that usually characterize that culture.

Opening Prayer (20 minutes)

Gather

Invite a volunteer to light the candle.

Prayer Leader: (begin with the Sign of the Cross)

God, Father of all of us,
We thank you for waking us up this morning, and we praise you for your goodness.
Be with us tonight as we learn about the ways that we violate the dignity that you
have created all of us with and give us the courage to fight racism wherever it exists.
We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

Listen

Invite the readers to take turns reading the reflections from **Resource 2, Reflections on Racism**.

Respond

Invite the participants to turn to a partner and discuss what they heard:

What surprised you from these quotes? What confused you? What challenged you?
What did you agree with? What did you disagree with?

Go Forth

Prayer Leader:

Loving Creator, you fashioned us with such beautiful diversity. We know it was not your intention for us to hate each other because of it! Bless us with your Spirit. Show us how to get beyond racism. Bring us together over issues that matter. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Exploring Racism (35 minutes)

Have the participants remain in their four groups. Give them **Handout 1, Exploring Racism**, and a pen.

Ask them to use the Vasteras method, developed in Sweden for small groups. One person reads each passage aloud. Then everyone reads it again silently, using the following symbols to mark insights, ideas, and questions:

- I** Make this candle marking beside phrases that give you a new insight.
- ^** Make this mark by phrases that tell you about God or come to you as good news.
- v** Make this mark by phrases that show a need you have or a challenge you face.
- ?** Make a question mark by anything you don't understand.

Allow about 10 minutes to read and make markings. After 10 minutes, call time and invite them to discuss their insights, ideas, and questions in small groups. Allow 15 minutes for discussion.

Then gather them back together, and ask for general feedback regarding what they learned, what they were most struck by, and what they want to know more about.

Announcements and Refreshments (15 minutes)

Make any announcements you might have regarding your parish or program. Invite the participants to have something to eat and drink before they leave. Thank them for their participation in tonight's session.

Notes

The Vasteras Method is explained on page 25 of *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter. It is available at www.waytolive.org and www.practicingourfaith.org.

Websites mentioned in this session were successfully accessed on February 20, 2007.

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Handout 1

Exploring Racism

Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our church. Despite apparent advances and even significant changes in the last two decades, the reality of racism remains. In large part it is only the external appearances which have changed.

(Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979, #1)

Recovering from everyday racism involves understanding the internalized racial formation of the citizens of the United States. This same formation occurs for the many immigrants [of] this country ... it will take leadership in this nation/family to bring about the necessary intervention to effect a recovery process to heal racial dysfunction.

(Recovery from Everyday Racisms by Clarence Earl Williams, Jr., 1999)

Racism is a Fact

Because the Courts have eliminated statutory racial discrimination and Congress has enacted civil rights legislation, and because some minority people have achieved some measure of success, many people believe that measure of success, many people believe that racism is no longer a problem in American life.

(Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979, #14)

I am where I am because of the bridges that I crossed. Sojourner Truth was a bridge. Harriet Tubman was a bridge. Ida B. Wells was a bridge. Madame C. J. Waler was a bridge. Fannie Lou Hamer was a bridge.

(Oprah Winfrey, http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_racism.html)

A Look at the Past

Racism has been a part of the social fabric of America since its European colonization. Whether it be the tragic past of the native Americans, the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans, or the blacks, the story is one of slavery, peonage, economic exploration, brutal repression, and cultural neglect. All have suffered indignity; most have been uprooted, defrauded or dispossessed of their lands; and none has escaped one or another form of collective degradation by a powerful majority. Our history is littered with the debris of broken promises and treaties, as well as lynchings and massacres that almost destroyed the Indians, humiliated the Hispanics, and crushed the blacks.

But despite this tragic history, the racial minorities of our country have survived and increased. The contribution of each racial minority is distinctive and rich; each is a source of internal strength for our nation. The history of all gives a witness to a truth absorbed by now into the collective consciousness of America: their struggle has been a pledge of liberty and a challenge to future greatness.

(Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979, #20-#21)

Despite the fact that by 2020 Hispanics will surpass blacks as the nation's leading minority, and may also surpass whites as the dominant ethnic group within the Catholic church, Hispanic Catholics are still second-class citizens in most Catholic parishes, and racism is still strong...

(Arthur Jones in National Catholic Reporter, http://www.natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives/021100/021100d.htm)

Language, Definitions, and Examples

White Privilege

People with white skin have certain privileges in the United States (and other countries) which other peoples do not share. For example, white people can find bandages that match their skin color in every drug store. White people can find greeting cards with pictures of people who look like them in almost every card shop. When a white person and a black person arrive – to be seated at a restaurant, to be served at the counter of a store, to look at a car in a used car lot – almost always, the white person is served first. When a white person needs something from a food store early in the morning, he or she can put on sweat pants and go there before taking a shower, without worrying that the person behind the counter will assume he or she is poor or homeless. A white person is almost never pulled over by a police officer while driving in a black neighborhood, yet black people are frequently pulled over while driving in white neighborhoods. This unfair practice is so prevalent that it's nicknamed, "DWB" – "Driving while Black."

White people are served first and suspected last, and so they waste less time and they suffer unnecessary embarrassment less often. All because of their lighter skin.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes can be negative or positive. They are generalizations about particular populations, based on shallow observations that may be accurate for at least a large minority of people from that particular population. However, stereotypes are harmful to all communities because they unfairly emphasize a few surface similarities at the expense of the many deeper individual differences among people from that population.

Examples might be:

"All Asians are brainy bookworms."

"All Blacks play basketball and eat watermelon and fried chicken."

"All Latinos speak Spanish."

"All Whites are rich and arrogant."

"All Native Americans live on reservation lands."

"All women are emotional."

"All men are logical."

"All teenagers are disrespectful."

Prejudice

This is personal and individual. Prejudice is formed when someone has a negative experience or hears a negative story about a particular type of person, and then develops negative feelings toward all people similar to this particular person.

Here is a common explanation of how this phenomenon works: First, a person burns his or her hand on a stove. Then, that person decides that all stoves are dangerous and will never again use a stove. Eventually, that person will refuse to enter a kitchen, for fear that a dangerous stove will cause a future burn. In extreme cases, that person will make derogatory comments about stoves, kitchens, and people who cook.

It is wise to learn from mistakes, and to realize that stoves CAN BE dangerous. But a decision to never use a stove or enter a kitchen creates unnecessary hardships in a person's life.

People of all ethnic backgrounds can develop negative personal opinions about people from other ethnic backgrounds. People of one gender can develop prejudice about people of the other gender. People who are older can develop prejudice regarding people who are younger; people who are younger can develop prejudice regarding people who are older.

Racism

Racism is not personal and individual. Racism is a network of universally-held assumptions and attitudes that favor and reward a dominant group at the expense of one or more oppressed groups. The result is a systemic network of practices and policies that continue to reinforce those unjust assumptions and attitudes. Racism is the result of a combination of widespread prejudice plus power and privilege.

Racism can be blatant or subtle. A blatant example is a set of civic laws that discriminate against members of oppressed groups: *Blacks are not allowed to vote*. A subtle example is a common practice that can be "explained away" by other circumstances: *Realtors show nicer homes in wealthier neighborhoods to only white customers*. Each individual realtor might be able to offer an excuse such as, "I thought they might prefer another neighborhood..." or "If they had asked me, I would have taken them there..." or "I didn't even think about that..." However, individual excuses cannot explain away the systemic yet unwritten policy that so many realtors practice.

This situation cannot be corrected by isolated individuals. It is not a personal issue, it is a universal justice issue. It takes an institutional effort to re-train people and make changes in government, media, business, and education. Usually, change does not happen easily. Written policies might change, and blatant behaviors might be reduced, but the more subtle practices could remain for generations.

Resource 2

Reflections on Racism

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person,
there is not male and female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ.
(Galatians 3:28)

One day, our descendants will think it incredible that we paid so much attention to things like the
amount of melanin in our skin, or the shape of our eyes, or our gender,
instead of the unique identities of each of us as complete human beings.
(Franklin Thomas)

The conquest of the earth,
which mostly means the taking it away from those
who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves,
is not a pretty thing when you look into it.
(Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*)

I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound
to the starless midnight of racism and war
that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.
I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.
(Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Racism is the maximum of hatred for the minimum of reason.
(Abraham Joshua Heschel)

Racial superiority is a mere pigment of the imagination.
(Author unknown)

Laundry is the only thing that should be separated by color.
(Author unknown)