

Agents for the New Creation:

A Pastoral Note on Christ's victory over the sins of racism

Downloaded 05/20-19 <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/pastoral-notes/agents-for-the-new-creation/>

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

An essential part of the “Foundational Conviction” for our local Church is a renewal of our structures to make them “Spirit-led and radically-mission oriented.”¹ This was a clear outcome from our Archdiocesan Synod which bore the fruit of my pastoral letter *Unleash the Gospel*. As the Church in Southeast Michigan, we are compelled and privileged to be led by the Holy Spirit so that we – each of us and all of us – are transformed by him. This transformation begins with our own repentance.

The first words of our Lord’s public ministry include the call to repent (cf. Mk. 1:14-15). The early preaching of the apostles includes no less a call to repentance as well: “Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:13-19). Therefore, repentance is the necessary first step for any believer in Jesus Christ. One cannot be a disciple of Jesus Christ unless he is willing to examine his life in the light of the Gospel.

The Gospel illuminates not just our relationship with God but also our relationship with others. All have been created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26-17). Each person bears within himself the very image of God. He possesses an inherent dignity upon which all moral authority is founded (cf. CCC 1930). Therefore, any act or attitude that diminishes another’s dignity is not in accord with the teachings of our Lord. As Christians, we have a solemn obligation to treat others with the same dignity that we possess. We are also obliged to form our consciences so that our attitudes – from which our actions flow – are conformed to this fundamental truth.

Our nation’s history has many tremendous accomplishments of which we should be proud. But it also bears the stain of many years of institutional racism whereby Blacks – even after emancipation – were treated as second-class citizens or worse. Complicit in these sins were many who professed the Catholic faith. Shamefully, this even includes priests, bishops, and other Catholic leaders. Sadly, we are living the wounds of those many years of injustice in our local communities. For the sins of these Catholics past and present, I as your Archbishop am truly sorry. Acts of racism are sins.

Racism produces three evil fruits. First, the recipient of these racial prejudices is greatly harmed. He is deprived of his inherent human dignity by actions or attitude of another person and thereby may struggle to realize his God-given value. Second, there is a societal harm from racism. As attitudes of injustice are transmitted to others, it becomes harder for us to reflect the equality of all men through societal structures. Finally, as with all sin, there is a self-

inflicted harm. The perpetrator of racial prejudice disfigures his own understanding of right and wrong and obscures his ability to see truth through the light of the Gospel.

As the Archdiocese of Detroit, we are committed to being radically mission-oriented. This means that our primary purpose for existing is to preach the Gospel: “[The Church] exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection.”² To be Catholic is to be mission-oriented rather than inward-focused.

Our mission is to proclaim the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. It is in him – through the power of his Holy Spirit – that we become “a new creation” (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). As a new creation, the lives and words of Christians must be beacons of light, pointing others to Jesus Christ. We do not do this in a vacuum; rather, it is in the particular circumstances of our local community that Jesus Christ must be preached.

For us in metro-Detroit, this mission-oriented attitude means that we keep Jesus Christ at the center of everything we do. He is the Lord; he has definitively conquered sin and death. His victory is final and irreversible. Our role is to entrust ourselves faithfully to him and to let his teaching shape our lives and our actions. It means as well that we live in the power of the Holy Spirit: “The Holy Spirit is God’s love poured into our hearts, revealing to us the Lordship of Jesus and our own exalted identity as beloved sons and daughters of God.”³ We are endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and thereby we share in Jesus’ victory over every oppression, sin, and death. Finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit fills us with hope. He is a transforming power who will reveal to us that “all are one in Christ Jesus” (cf. Gal. 3:28).

Being one in Christ does not dissolve our differences. Rather, it is the variety of gifts which Christ gives to the faithful through his Holy Spirit which makes his Bride, the Church, more able to reflect God’s goodness. As the Church grew from home in Jerusalem and spread through North Africa, Asia, and Europe, different customs and traditions consonant with the revealed faith and appropriate to local communities were developed. We see this richness expressed in the various liturgical rites which are present in our Eastern Churches, many of whose members call Southeast Michigan home.

The gifts of the African American faithful are a tremendous blessing to the Archdiocese of Detroit. We would be a much poorer Church without the expressions of faith through prayer, music, and personal testimony proper to the Black communities. And these expressions are a leaven to the Catholic Church. They are charisms which God has given to the whole Church through our African American brothers and sisters. This is one of the primary reasons that earlier this year, I commissioned the Mass of the Sacred Heart by Keir Ward. It is also why a number of the Unleash the Gospel Action Steps are particularly focused serving and growing the presence of African American Catholics in the Archdiocese of Detroit.⁴

In his most recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Pope Francis writes that “holiness is the most attractive face of the Church.”⁵ As we seek to build a more just society – one in which we can truly say that racism has been defeated – we must begin, as Christians, with our personal commitment to Jesus Christ. It is by imitating him that I can provide a credible witness to the world. This can only happen when we are strengthening each other on the journey: “Growth in holiness is a journey in community, side by side with others.”⁶

As we confront the sin of racism within ourselves, in others, or in our society, we do not do it alone. In the Archdiocese of Detroit, we are recommitting ourselves to becoming a community of believers – a band of joyful missionary disciples – who affirm each person’s human dignity and are continually returning to the source of that dignity, the Triune God: Father of all men and women; Jesus Christ, who shed his blood to save everyone; and the Holy Spirit, the bond of love who unites the community of believers.

To conclude I particularly commend to you the memory of Blessed Solanus Casey, whom the Lord in his great mercy gave us as one of the outstanding members in our family of faith. Let Father Solanus be for us still a shining example of how to show love to everyone we meet, and of how to treat all people with dignity and respect. Let him be for us still a powerful intercessor to obtain the grace from on High that we need to be agents for healing the wounds of racism in our community, and to be agents of the new creation in Christ.

Entrusting you and your families to the loving care of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, and to our Patron, St. Anne, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron

Endnotes

1. Unleash the Gospel, Foundational Conviction
2. Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.
3. Unleash the Gospel, 4.1
4. Action Steps 3.3A, 3.3B
5. Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 9.
6. *Ibid.*, 141.