

Ethnic and racial pre-judging

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The Presbyteral Council in April will examine the U.S. bishops (USCCB) 2018 statement on racism, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love — A Pastoral Letter Against Racism | *Abramos nuestros corazones: El incesante llamado al amor — Carta pastoral contra el racismo.*” This council is required by Church law to advise the bishop on pastoral vision and efforts. The text was produced after a wide consultation and several revisions. It is not the first bishops’ statement about race issues, but was needed after race-related violence in Ferguson, Mo., Baltimore and other cities. (I am writing this two days after 50 Muslim worshippers were gunned down in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.)

I have heard someone say that we have a lot on our plates, and do we need to spotlight this issue just now? And I say that there are groups of people who have been waiting centuries for remedies, and who am I to ask them to wait? Life is complex and there will always be multiple issues demanding our attention.

On March 8, I participated in a racism listening session sponsored by the University of Dayton, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and the USCCB. There were more than 20 speakers, most all Catholics, each having three or four minutes to speak their experience of racial bias within their churches and communities. There were Anglo/white, Vietnamese, Hispanic and African-American presenters. A key objective of such regional sessions is, among others, to speak directly to bishops and clergy outside the gaze of video cameras and microphones. A session for Indiana is in early stages of planning.

At the Dayton session, a self-identified middle-aged white woman noted how her fellow worshippers congratulate themselves on not being racist. But racism, as recent experience has reinforced, is just as much a systemic problem as it is about individual attitudes. In practice, they cannot be separated.

I apologize (that is, explain) for suggesting some readings, for two reasons. First, our freedom and citizenship depend on our being well informed. For Catholics, that means being spiritually well formed and on guard against whatever is unholy. Second, I suspect that, no matter who you are, reading one or all of several texts will help you to understand that none of us has a natural immunity to prejudice. And that past immunities might have diminished over time. So let me suggest “Open Wide Our Hearts” mentioned above. Then there is “Encountering Christ in Harmony: A Pastoral Response to Our Asian and Pacific Island Brothers and Sisters” from June 2018. Each of these is available at usccb.org.

Lastly, there is the January 2019 book by Deborah E. Lipstadt, “Anti-semitism: Here and Now.” I have been studying this issue for the better part of my lifetime. What is important for us to know now is that this hateful attitude somehow reconstitutes itself in each decade, but is being manipulated in our country and across the globe. Professor Lipstadt gives particular attention to the growth of anti-semitism on university campuses. The reader may question one or two of her conclusions, but her survey of the problem will give us much to think about by naming various comments that commonly pepper everyday conversation.

All this is not to make us feel bad, but to motivate us by helping us to know the power and influence each has to help heal broken situations. As the Dayton listening session made plain, texts are only conversation starters. The real goal is that we will be encouraged toward personal encounters that build bridges and hope.