



It is Right and Just

Journeying from Racism to Communion in Christ

Pastoral Letter from Bishop Jaime Soto

Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King,
Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King,
Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King,
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, we're goin' to see the King!

(Soon and Very Soon, Andraé Crouch, 1976)

This beautiful hymn brings a trembling, mixed with longing and the fear of the Lord. The verse speaks to the lament of crying and dying while beckoning the believer to hope. A disciple of Jesus should embrace these words, let the words quiver the heart. With the looming horizon of Christ's coming, we should take up an examination of racism within our Church and society because, "Soon and very soon we are goin' to see the King."

Following the publication of *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the pastoral letter on racism approved in 2018 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I convened an anti-racism working group to assist me with applying the letter to the pastoral work in the Diocese of Sacramento. This letter is in response to the diligent and devout work of this group.

The consequences of racism affect many of our brothers and sisters in the diverse cultural fabric of American society. This pastoral letter will reflect primarily on the experience of the African American community as a window into its impact on all of us.

The words of the popular Black spiritual quoted above are familiar to many of us. When it is sung by an

African American congregation, the words swell with emotion. Hands reach up to heaven. Feet become restless. Even though the Hallelujahs are jubilant, there are also tears streaming down from the eyes of many. The words from the subsequent verses, “No more crying there,” “No more dying there” console a congregation where there is both crying and dying still.

The inspiration for the hymn comes from the closing lines of the Book of Revelation. “The one who gives this testimony says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!” (REV. 22:20) Apocalyptic themes are not foreign to the Catholic imagination. In the embolism to the Our Father we pray at every Mass, “By the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” The hymn brings a fervent urgency to this petition. “Soon and very soon we are goin’ to see the King.”

Hear with the heart this jubilant yet plaintive song from the Black spiritual tradition. Are the words a promise or a foreboding? Jesus pondered this with his disciples in the gospel according to Luke. “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (LK. 18:8) Are we ready? Do we even look for his coming, or will he surprise us like a thief in the night? “Behold, I am coming like a thief.” (REV. 16:15)

Social upheaval in recent years has awakened many of us to the persistent plague of racism. This sin has no place in the Kingdom of God. The often-repeated supplication to the Father, “Thy kingdom come,” urges us to heed the King’s admonition in Matthew 25, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (MT. 25:40) Necessarily so, an examination of conscience is incumbent on Catholics and all people of faith. The Word of God is a two-edged sword that pierces into our words, actions and omissions. In the sacred chamber of the soul, under the gaze of God, we must humbly and honestly probe the motives and consequences of our personal conduct.

“Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.” (*Open Wide Our Hearts*, pg.3, USCCB) Racism is a grave sin that embitters the heart of both the offender and the offended. It poisons conversations and corrupts relationships. These sinful patterns of thinking and behavior become so habitual that one is unaware of the harm being done. These habits creep into the culture becoming unquestionable social norms. Racism perpetuates the other sins of violence, social deprivation, capital punishment, and abortion by providing a presumed justification that demeans the dignity of another as “inferior and unworthy of equal regard” because of the color of one’s skin, or language one speaks, or the place of one’s birth.

Bear in mind, the habitual nature of sin may blind us to the corrupting influences of racism. The Catholic Catechism teaches us, “Sin creates a proclivity to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts. This results in perverse inclinations which cloud conscience and corrupt the concrete judgment of good and evil. Thus sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself, but it cannot destroy the moral sense at its root.” (CCC, 1865) Racism often hides itself in just this way. We must reach for the moral sense at the root of our human nature, in our conscience, where we are alone with God whose voice echoes in our depth. (cf. CCC, 1776)

The habit of judging others is learned. Often it is learned from the manners and language of others. Children learn it from parents. Young people acquire it from peers. Adults take cues from managers or coworkers. Sadly,

racism can be part of a culture that clouds conscience and corrupts the concrete judgment of good and evil.

Racism exists in many parts of the world. Throughout Latin America, powerful biases against indigenous and Afro communities still hold sway in many countries. India has a deeply ingrained caste system that dictates many daily social norms. A number of European societies struggle to accept African and Middle Eastern migrants.

American society has its own particular history of racism. The recognized commentator on American life and culture, Alexis de Tocqueville, authored an insightful examination of the young Republic still finding its way in the early 1800s, *Democracy in America*. De Tocqueville extolled many of the American virtues that have fostered a durable democracy, highlighting such laudable characteristics as the vitality of voluntary associations, the influence of faith in public life, and allocation of effective power to the local level. The author's keen eye on American Life also critically noted the practice of slavery and the hostility toward indigenous people. He worried over several pages about the European imposition of their presumed cultural superiority on the two unfortunate populations.

These two unlucky races have neither birth, physique, language, nor mores in common; only their misfortunes are alike. Both occupy an equally inferior position in the land where they dwell; both suffer the effects of tyranny, and, though their afflictions are different, they have the same people to blame for them. (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1848, vol. 1, chapter 10)

De Tocqueville's reflections haunt us. Words written almost 200 years ago still resonate today. Some commentators have referred to it as this nation's original sin. The Catechism teaches that as a result of Adam and Eve's original sin "human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and inclined to sin." (CCC, 418) In an analogous way, the sin of racism continues to weaken our culture and our conscience. The habitual vice of racism blinds us to the motives and makes us indifferent to the consequences.

It is a shameful part of our past and still persists today, despite many noble efforts to undo the pernicious patterns of prejudice. The Catholic Church in the United States of America has not been immune from the cultural contagion of racism. The breath and beauty of the cultural diversity in Catholic Church has always been a wellspring of hope and renewal. Throughout our history in this country, we have been an immigrant church. We do a disservice to this legacy if we romanticize its history. Only by the mercy of Jesus and the unrelenting winds of the Holy Spirit have we defied our doubts or fears to come together at the Table of the Lord. Those doubts and fears as well as blindness are still among us and keep us from opening wide the doors of God's House. The doubts, fears and blindness are not particular to one ethnic group. The sin of racism can contaminate any of us, clouding our judgment and warping our actions. We know that conversion and repentance are the only paths to grace. Addressing racism will ask the same of us.

In the Diocese of Sacramento, we have been conducting an examination of conscience that has brought to light the ways we have not welcomed or revered one another as members of the one Body of Christ. There are reasons for shame and sorrow.

During the listening sessions, many people of different races and cultures shared stories of prejudice and exclusion. The sessions created a space where the pain of racism felt by different members of the Body of Christ could be heard. I will focus on the testimonies of our friends in the African American community.

A common lament has arisen from African American brothers and sisters that they are invisible in our parishes. They sit in the pews, but they do not hear their songs. No one preaches or teaches to their concerns. Ministers are not from their communities. Parishes are located in their communities but do not draw from their neighbors. As the topic of racism was on the minds and hearts of many of the Faithful, pastors were reluctant to bring it up and discouraged efforts to address it. In one case, “there are more important issues” was the response.

There are few African American Catholic members working with me at the Pastoral Center, at the parishes, in our schools or serving in the many charitable agencies throughout the Diocese of Sacramento. There may be many reasons for this unsettling outcome. Some of those reasons: We often prefer the familiar. We rely on established social circles. We presume that others are not interested. Hospitality is defined by what makes us comfortable and fails to ask how to make others welcomed. We should go beyond those explanations to understand the un-reflected, unconscious patterns that keep us from a broader communion of faith and charity.

As I have listened to the testimonies, often tearful, from Black Catholics, I have heard sorrowful pangs from Church-inflicted wounds and with the same aching voice a resolute determination, “I still believe. . . I’m still Catholic.” As if in spite of the Church, not because of the Church, they choose to remain in communion with Christ and the Church that was born from the blood flowing from His pierced Sacred Heart. One witness said she kept coming to the Catholic Church because of the Sacrament of Confession, from which she received such great mercy and consolation. Does her testimony also point to us the way we must go? The ritual of the Sacrament of Penance is an instrument as well as a teacher for the Christian journey to the Kingdom: Examination, repentance, conversion, confession, and the resolve to sin no more.

“Soon and very soon, we are goin’ to see the King” helps us see beyond the difficulties, the bitterness, and reciprocated animosities of the current social climate. The coming of Christ is cause for restless expectation and diligent hope because “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” (MK. 1:15) These words of Jesus assure that our hopes for the Kingdom are within our reach. The history of the Catholic Church in the United States is filled with shameful disappointments, but it also harbors many lights of inspiration and encouragement. The personal holiness of Blessed Pierre Toussaint, Henriette Delille, Blessed Augustus Tolton, Blessed Mary Elizabeth Lange, and Servant of God Sr. Thea Bowman. There is a rich tradition of liturgy and song that has flourished in many African American Parishes. The Catholic associations of the Knights of St. Peter Claver and the Black Catholic Congress are fruits of the perseverance of Black Catholics and the Holy Spirit despite the persistence of sin of racism in the Catholic Church. These all point to a blessed trove of Spiritual gifts that we risk losing unless we open wide our hearts to those with whom we can confidently stand before the King (cf. MT 25:32). They matter to us. They matter to our salvation. We impoverish ourselves by not embracing the beautiful breadth of our Catholic tradition. We risk finding ourselves knocking at the door because we missed the moment of the King’s visitation.

A dedicated team of coworkers worked with me during the first year of listening, learning, and examining the experience of racism in the Diocese of Sacramento. I am grateful for their good work and for the recommendations for continuing the journey away from racism to reconciliation and communion. I hope these steps will lead our diverse cultural choir of faith to sing in harmony with the heart of Jesus the one song of praise to the God and Father of us. I invite you to walk with me in taking the following steps:

- Promote more racial dialogues in the parishes.
- Develop racial dialogues between parishes and neighboring faith congregations.
- Train clergy, catechists, teachers and other parish leaders to conduct racial dialogues in parishes and schools.
- Provide pastoral moments for accountability, healing and reconciliation.
- Support teacher development related to teaching about race and cultural competency.
- Provide regular educational opportunities for students and adults to understand the sinful nature of racism and learn about the diverse cultural expressions of the Catholic Faith in the Diocese of Sacramento.
- Develop curriculum in the Catholic schools, age appropriate for elementary through high school, for learning about race and racism from a Catholic moral perspective. Curriculum should be extended to include parish religious education for children's faith formation and parish youth groups.
- Parishes and Newman Centers will be identified and supported in cultivating an active Black Catholic ministry focused on liturgy, fellowship, teaching, and outreach into the African American community.
- Evaluate outreach, recruitment, and hiring policies and practices to foster a better integration with the communities we serve.
- Expect that bishops, clergy, and pastoral coworkers will be more intentional in identifying and cultivating relationships with the African American community and other active ethnic communities in the Diocese of Sacramento.
- Convene an annual workshop for priests and deacons to provide educational opportunities for clergy to learn about racism and tools for learning meaningful dialogue, rooted in Catholic moral teaching. Include lessons/tools for clergy on how to develop sermons and preach against racism in Sunday homilies.
- The ad-hoc working group against Racism will continue to convene as the Intercultural Committee on Access, Integration, and Mission to assist me in implementing the above objectives. The Committee will be constituted by members of the pastoral center staff and lay members from the Black Catholic community and other cultural communities. The Committee will provide regular reports to the Diocesan Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council and Pastoral Center. The Committee will have a term of three years.

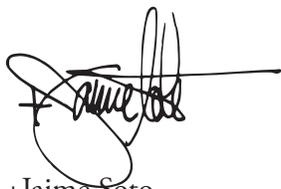
This work is “right and just.” These words are pronounced by the assembly of the faithful at the initial dialogue of the Preface for every Eucharistic Prayer during the Sacrifice of the Mass. As the Eucharistic Prayer is “right and just” so the Church must continue the sacramental work of the Eucharist by removing all sin that keeps us from a greater communion in Christ Jesus. At this moment in the history of the Diocese of Sacramento, it is right and just for us to purify ourselves of the sin of racism so that we may more fully unite ourselves with Christ who “broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh.” (EPH. 2:14)

The path proposed by this letter is not for the sake of introspection and self-examination. The present time

offers us an opportune moment to embrace more fully the gospel of Jesus. Being renewed in Christ we can better renew the world in which he sends us with the same mercy and consolation we have received from the Lord. (cf. II COR. 1:4) Redeemed by His grace we can be the earthen vessels of that grace for others. (cf. II COR. 4:7)

Let us approach this initiative with missionary zeal. Remember the two principal missionaries of the early Church, the apostles Peter and Paul. At the heart of their missionary endeavors was the testimony of personal encounters with the mercy of Jesus. One denied the Lord. (JN. 21:15-19) The other persecuted his followers. (GAL. 1:11-18) Both knew what it meant to be saved by the blood of the Lamb of God. Purifying and healing the Church from the sinful wound of racism will hopefully become our testimony to the merciful work of Jesus among us. This is the unique language we can bring to the often-bitter social discourse. It is a Catholic language: repentance, conversion, and communion in Christ. It is also the message of hope which we can offer to one another and to our communities. That hope is not rooted in ourselves, but only in Christ crucified. (I COR. 2:2) His glory and grace will fill our souls with the joyful yearning. “Soon and very soon, we are goin’ to see the King.”

In the Holy Year of St. Joseph, I commend this effort to the powerful patron of the Universal Church and plead for the affection our Blessed Mother Mary, under whose maternal gaze we are all her children. May their intercession guide us in the wisdom and mercy of the Lord Jesus.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jaime Soto', with a horizontal line extending to the right across the end of the signature.

+Jaime Soto
Bishop of Sacramento