

RACISM

Father James Chelich – February 2021

THE ROOTS OF RACISM

1. When a reasonable fear becomes irrational and destructive of human dignity

No one likes to think that a root of racism might spring out of our efforts to protect our children and young people from danger and victimization. It can and we need to understand how. Parents will instinctively want to protect their children from danger and abuse. This is good. They will warn and instruct their children to never talk to strangers and not to go too near strangers unless they are with them. This is perfectly reasonable. There is, in fact, sin in the world. Some people are, in fact, violent and perpetrate abuse. Not everyone is nice and not everyone can be trusted. Parents out with their young children, naturally look at an approaching stranger with apprehension. There is nothing wrong with this. To protect our children the best and safest rule *to start out with* is to teach them to be wary of strangers. This is not racism. It is the virtue of prudence. What we need to see, however, is that it inadvertently instills in a child a fear of “strangers,” not only people they don’t know, but people who look different, or talk different. If something else does not happen as they grow older, this *innocent and reasonable* assumption that strangers (people who are different or “strange”) pose a potential threat or danger will be carried into adult attitudes and reactions to people who look strange (different than them).

As their children get older, parents need to progressively train them *to watch how other people behave* before they place themselves in a vulnerable place with them or engage with them in any activity. We teach them to *discern*. Just because someone looks strange or speaks oddly, does not mean that they are a threat and should be feared and avoided. We train our children to smile and speak courteously to everyone they encounter. But we also teach them not to get too close until they can see that their *actions are consistently virtuous and safe*. We train them not to judge anyone as “bad” or “dangerous” until they have evidence. If you fail to help your children develop moral perception, you can readily see what an awful predicament you place them in. They are left to judge people by surface appearances only. This is a root of racism. They continue to assume that any stranger (i.e., person who looks strange) is dangerous, a threat and to be avoided. This leads them to isolate those who are different, mock and demean them. Jesus taught us this principle: “By their fruits you shall know them.” (Matthew 7:16) People who do not gain the ability to assess others on the basis of their observed attitudes, words and actions are not “nice and non-judgmental,” they are potential targets for victimization at the hands of manipulative people who appear to be “like us.” In light of what I have said above, you can see what a horrible thing segregation is. You can’t get close enough to people who are “strange” to get to know them as persons, to see that they are people just like you. You can only make assumptions about their attitudes, words and actions, and these assumptions are equally applied to everyone who is “strange” in the same way (color, nationality, religious faith, political affiliation).

2. When we bequeath to our children hatreds, fears and resentments that are not their own.

Memory is long, especially the memory of abuse, trauma, victimization, violence or injustice. This is true in the life of an individual, but it is also true in the life of communities of people.

Here is another root to racism. Individuals tend to want to share their latent angers and resentments (their pain) with those around them, especially family members. But it goes too far and you are asked to “take on” their anger and resentments as a badge of loyalty to them: to hate those they hate and to resent those they resent. Communities actively inculcate their angers and hatreds toward those groups (class, nation, race) who victimized them into the minds and hearts of the next generation. Here, again, it is considered loyalty to one’s community to do so. There is often good reason for an individual who was the victim of abuse and violence to feel anger and antipathy toward someone who victimized and abused him. The danger is that he wants those close to him to feel the same burning antipathy not only to the actual victimizer *but to anyone connected or associated with them (to anyone “like them”)*. Communities who have suffered abuse and violence at the hands of other communities do the same – generation after generation. After a while Croatians hate Serbians because it is “Croatian” to do so. Irish hate English because it is “Irish” to do so. Who we hate becomes an organic part of our family, communal or national identity. Someone has to be courageous enough to break this chain of counterfeit loyalty or it will go mindlessly on and on. Someone has to say: “I am not going to resent and hate them just because someone or some group two generations ago had very good reason for feeling that way.” If it goes on it will rip the fabric of humanity to shreds and render men and women inhumane in the process. Jesus gives us the strength to say, “This ends with me.” No one has a longer memory of our individual and collective abuse of Him and His world than God, and God lets it go the moment we repent. In Catholic Faith, forgiveness does not mean: “It’s OK. I don’t mind.” Forgiveness means: “It is time to let it go, and move forward with everyone of good will.”

3. When we need a scapegoat for everything that is wrong in our life.

When everything is coming down around you, you want to look for answers, the simpler the better. Nothing serves better than to find a victim soul or group who you can target as the cause of all your problems. Then you don’t have to look at yourself or the choices you have made. Here is the easy answer: target them. Punish them and you will feel better. Get rid of them and the problem will be solved. This was an operative principle in Soviet Communism. 300 million people were sent to the Gulag camps and to their death because of it. This proclivity is deeply imbedded in our fallen human nature: blame rather than think and take responsibility.

Racism easily becomes a tool in the hands of the malicious.

People whose personal agenda is to gain power will deliberately stir up reasons for and fuel hatred toward targeted individuals or groups. There is no easier way for a demagogue to acquire power than to identify an individual or group and portray them as the perpetrator and cause of everything that is wrong in people’s lives, the community or the country. Hitler did that with the Jews. He deliberately stirred up and fueled racism to propel himself to power. The demagogue says to himself: “If a person or group knows who they hate, it gives them a point of solidarity as a people. As long as I keep their hatred inflamed I can manipulate them to my ends.” It is disturbing to see how easily and effectively this works. That is why it is necessary to know not only what is good but what is evil. You have to be able to recognize it early. Manufactured hatred and antipathy toward others has always been a tool to garner personal influence and galvanize group or national cohesion and identity. We have to have a good nose for a hate monger, even when they are dressed in academic robes or clerical attire.

4. When we need someone to look at and say, “At least I am better than them.”

Sometimes you don’t even need someone hungry for power or prestige to keep racism burning.

If you are dirt poor and white, at least you can say that your aren't as low as that black person. You gain self-esteem by seeing yourself standing higher than another man or woman. You need to keep them down so that you can think yourself better. This is also at the root of bullying the weak, the awkward, the different, the "stranger." The need to do it is pathetic and cruel, but it is understandable: When you have no way to lift your head, find someone who you can push down so that you can say that your head is higher than theirs. It is not enough to just disdain and arrest it. We have to understand it and find ways to help people stand tall in the right way. Disdain to fight disdain will go nowhere. Our religious faith teaches us that to help others stand tall in virtue, self-sacrifice and heroism is the way for all to move forward.

HOW RACISM WORKS

A black parent who had just enrolled in our school was asked these questions by white parents in a casual social setting: "Are you here on scholarship? How much is the non-parishioner rate? How can you afford it?" Here is what the black parent heard being said to them: "You are black. That puts you in a category: Black People. People in your category could not possibly afford to be here without help. People like you are out of place *here*." This exchange illustrates the subtlety of Racism.

Racism sees a person possessing a common characteristic, like black or brown skin, a Hispanic accent, Asian features, not married, etc., and *assumes* that those who possess this characteristic also possess other characteristics, like being poor, uneducated, promiscuous, couldn't be a doctor or the chief executive of a bank, etc. Because most often people do not think before they speak or act, they speak or act upon the unconscious *assumptions* they have acquired. What they say and do, based on their *prejudiced assumptions*, delivers a very clear message to the person with whom they are interacting. The person on the receiving end receives the full and bitter sting of racism's lash: she has been put in a box, it is labeled, and she is supposed to know her place.

Let me offer another example. Deborah Armstrong, Director of InterCity Christian Federation's Family Haven, visited a first grade classroom at Saint Thomas School after the first graders had completed a service project for Family Haven. During her presentation she told the children that she helps the homeless. A first grader responded, "You mean black people like you." Later, in a conversation with the teacher, Deb said: "You have a lot of work to do here." We did.

The child mentioned in the incident above made the assumption: "If you are homeless, you must be black." This assumption came from somewhere. Let's not assume that it was from their parents. Instead, let's just say they got it from somewhere and that we very much want to know where, so that no one else gets it too.

Adults weave the *world of assumptions* that envelop our children. Adults generate the *atmosphere of attitudes* that they breathe in – day in and day out. We will never get an answer to "Where did they get it from?" unless we are willing to look honestly both at ourselves and at the environments in which we live and work. This is not about protecting our children from the darkness in the world. At times, we want to and have to do that. The truth is that children have to make their way in a very real world of cruel assumptions and the social structures that are built upon them. These assumptions and social structures destroy the dignity of persons and compromise their equal access to opportunities to equip themselves and participate in society as equal players. Our continuing task together is:

- 1) to identify *prejudiced assumptions*,
- 2) to discover where they are coming from and how they are formed,

- 3) to help ourselves and our children recognize them and name them for what they are.
- 4) to lend a hand in the effort to change “the way things are” in the world.

WHAT WE CAN DO

The end of racism begins with you and me. Attitudes have to change in people before structures change how we do business and interact socially. Otherwise, any change in structure will only lead to more resentment and animosity between people. There are four things you can do.

First, examine yourself. Each of us carries within ourselves “automatic assumptions” about people with certain characteristics (skin color, accent, mannerisms, marital status, etc.) We need to be able to name them to ourselves. We then need to see them for what they are: prejudice or that particular form of prejudice called “racism.” Next, we must press ourselves to identify where these “automatic assumptions” came from in our life experience. This is not pleasant or easy to do. Often the place where they came from is pretty close to home.

As a parent, you are the first educator of your children. You need to be able to explain to your children how prejudice and racism works in you, if you are going to help them recognize how it works in them. It takes a lot of humility and courage to be willing to let your life be a resource for the moral growth of your children. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said: “There is no greater love than this to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15: 13) To be a parent, “Do what I say” is not enough. “Do what you see me trying to do and know why it is important to me,” is the necessary gift of yourself as a parent to your children. For many people, this self-examination is not easy. That is why both our parish and school will continue to offer opportunities and resources to assist you.

Second, stop and think before you speak or act with people who have the characteristics that summon prejudiced assumptions in you. Literally, say to yourself:

“They are black, Hispanic, single, etc. I tend to assume that they are not well off, that they are not trustworthy, that they can’t afford a house like mine, etc.”

When you speak or act, resolve that you will not say, ask or do anything that you would not say, ask or do to a person like yourself. Jesus said, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Matt. 7:12) We need to give this more than lip service. We need to put serious effort into it.

Third, take a hard look at the environments that surround you and your children.

What is in the social environment of your home, your extended family, your workplace, your church and school community, or in the media that reinforces prejudiced assumptions about people with certain characteristics? Identify them for your children and explain what they are making people believe. Remove them, if possible. Draw attention to them and correct them when they present themselves. If you cannot remove them or correct them in your child’s environment, at least talk with your child about how not to be taken in by them in forming their attitude toward others.

Fourth, lend a hand, in any way you can, to correct the structures of our society that perpetuate racist assumptions and deny people human dignity and opportunity because of them. Your prayers will help. Prayer makes us aware, keeps us vigilant, and summons courage to act.