

RACISM, THE WORD OF GOD AND THE FAITH OF CATHOLICS

Father James Chelich – February 2021

The Catholic Faith sees racism as a crime against God, creation, humanity and the Body of Christ. This sin strikes the conscience of a woman or man of Catholic Faith every bit as deeply as the abortion of a child. To understand why this conviction and feeling runs so deep requires only a short walk through the Sacred Scriptures of our Faith, to examine those truths that lie at the very core of what it means to be a Catholic.

**In the beginning...God said...
and God looked at everything He made, and found it very good.
Genesis 1:1,3 and 31**

A Catholic contemplates this first chapter of the Book of Genesis in a way that penetrates deep beneath the surface of the narration of the Creation Story, to the truths revealed within it. Here we see the Creator pronouncing the universe into existence and fashioning a garden world in the midst of it. What kind of world? Not a world of random chance and chaos, but a world in which each element, has its own *integrity*, and is placed uniquely in a *life-giving relationship* with each other, all of which work to sustain the living whole. Racism is a sin against God's creating of such a world. It is an act of contempt that says that we will segregate and divide this divinely created, interrelated, living whole, and do with the pieces as we please. The Bible says, "All of creation groans in agony" under this abuse. What God has created and found "very good," humanity in its rebellion divides, segregates and makes ugly.

**Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...
God created man in His image; in the divine image He created him;
male and female he created them.
Genesis 1:26, 27**

In this garden world of God's creating, God fashions and places an extraordinary creature, which God declares made "in His image" and to which he gives a span of life to grow "into His likeness." This is how a Catholic sees the life of each human being. Possessed of a mind that can look at the created world with wonder and awe, a heart that has stamped upon it a facet of God's own heart of caring, and hands to unfold the life-giving potential of each element, man and woman are given stewardship of the earth. This is how Catholics understand the purpose and place of each human being in the world. Even more glorious, this creature is capable of communion with the mind, the heart and the very life of God. This is how Catholics see the sacred dignity of each man and woman. The one and only distinction in humanity that is of the Original Creating was that of male and female; and this distinction is a complementarity designed to bring out the fullness of humanity in man and woman. In this light Catholic Faith sees racism as a sin against humanity – the humanity of God's creating. Racism places a distinction where God created none and draws none. One race choosing to stand apart from another, in opposition to another or in oppression of another surrenders its humanity.

Racism renders a man or woman incapable of mirroring forth the image of God. They are disabled, by their own hardness of heart, from gaining any gift or favor from God, except the grace of repentance, which is never withdrawn. Closing themselves off from a part of who they are as one humanity, they close themselves off from God. That racism is mortally sinful is deeply lodged in Catholic consciousness.

**Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it.
Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air,
and all the living things that move on the earth.**

Genesis 1:28

Racism is a sin against God's design for the stewardship of the earth. Only if humanity acts as a fully integrated whole can it steward the earth in a way that will open its potential to give life. No segment of humanity, standing alone, in opposition or oppression of another, can successfully steward the earth in the opening of its potential. Their efforts will inevitably turn back upon them, not to their life but to their destruction, and they will lay waste the earth. The Word of God is clear: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" Leviticus 19:19. Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, is clear: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Matthew 7:12. Could God say it any more plainly: You are not to rip the fabric of humanity! Creation will not abide nor forgive that sin.

Then God delivered all these commandments...

Exodus 20:1, Leviticus 19:9-18

God gives specific Commandments. In them God reveals a specific aspect of the integrity of someone or something that He then commands us to honor and never violate. These specific commandments form a minimum, a base line beneath which we may not fall without risking a complete collapse of our humanity and the life-giving integrity of our world. Some examples are:

- 1) the integrity of the Truth:
Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16),
- 2) the integrity of marriage and family:
Thou shalt not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14),
- 3) the integrity of human life:
Thou shalt not kill (Exodus 20:13),
- 4) the integrity of the human person:
You shall not curse the deaf, or put a stumbling block in front of the blind (Leviticus 19:13-14).

Catholic Faith sees beneath these specific commandments **a commandment** more profound. God's specific commandments point to and form **a principle** that God commands us to adopt in *our attitude and handling of all things*. God commands that we study the integrity of any one or any thing before we interact with it or use it. We are to honor it. We are never violate this integrity. God also commands that we study the life-giving relationship that a person or thing has with other persons or things, and their role in sustaining the life of the whole. We are to honor it. We are to do nothing to violate this life-sustaining relationship. For Catholic's this is the foundation of the sciences and the rule for all scientific activity. Racism shreds the moral order of human existence at its core. It violates the integrity of individual men and women and humanity as a whole. It violates the life-giving relationship between individuals and peoples.

The Moral Order is valid because it is objectively the Right and Life-giving Order of Things. The proof of its validity lies in the devastating consequences of violating it. The world comes crashing down upon us or envelopes us in a fiery rage that destroys everything decent and good. Racism is an assault on the life-sustaining order of existence.

**Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you have no life in you...**

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.

John 6:53,55-56

Catholics read this passage of the Gospel of John as Jesus' explanation of what he means when at the Last Supper he says: "Take this and eat of it, for this is my body, "Take this all of you and drink of it, for this is the cup of my blood," "Do this in remembrance of me." For Catholics, these words are not time bound. They are not limited to an event two thousand years ago. They are eternal and made ever present. Catholics believe that Jesus himself, stands at the altar at every Mass and says these words, in person, to his disciples who have assembled with him. On any Sunday he is present at Mass in a million places across the globe and among gathered men and women of every race and tongue. In each of those places Jesus give them his flesh to eat and this blood to drink. In doing this Jesus joins men and women of every race and tongue to himself as members of his body – flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood, his unity with them complete. (John 17:22-23) For Catholics, this is nothing less than the re-creation of humanity. Jesus restores humanity to what it was created to be by making it's broken and segregated pieces (races and nationalities) his own flesh and blood – *one and the same* flesh and blood. Consider this carefully.

In Holy Communion we receive the flesh and blood of God to become the flesh and blood of God. We are not just figuratively or analogously sons and daughters of God, we are substantially sons and daughters of God in Jesus Christ. All of us, every person, of every race and every nationality, around the entire globe receiving Holy Communion becomes, by Jesus' direct act, a flesh and blood relative of God. Racism is a denial of what Jesus does in Holy Communion, a crime against the flesh and blood of God.

In Holy Communion we receive the flesh and blood of God to become the flesh and blood of one another. In the act of receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus in Holy Communion we become flesh and blood of one another. Reception of the Eucharist makes us not figuratively, or even morally, but substantially and literally the flesh and blood of those of every race and nationality, around the entire globe who receive with us. Racism is a denial of what Jesus does in Holy Communion, a crime against our own flesh and blood.

In Holy Communion we receive the body and blood of Christ to become the Body of Christ: the Church. Jesus creates his Body, the Church, out of the substance of his flesh and blood offered, taken and eaten. In each celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass and each act of receiving Holy Communion, Jesus creates a new humanity, taking what sin has broken and divided and restoring it to what God created it to be: one and seamless. This new humanity is the Church, the Body of Christ, consecrated to witness the truth of a restored humanity to all men and women. For a Catholics, racism is an assault on this new humanity and our call to proclaim it in our very being.

**How can you say to your brother or sister,
'Let me remove that splinter from your eye,' while the wooden beam is in your eye?**

**You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first;
then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother or sister's eye.**

Matthew 7:4-5

In a Catholic's thinking, the first place to bring racism to an end *is within yourself*. "Examine yourself," Saint Paul Says, "to see whether you are living in faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" 2 Corinthians 13:5 The irrational and false assumptions we attach to people who are strange or different in a particular way are formed or accumulated over a lifetime. They are either absorbed from the attitudes, words and actions of those who live and work around us or the result of trauma we suffered at the hands of someone, but which we now ascribe to everyone who have the same appearance or belongs to the same group (Asian, black, poor, homeless, or a certain nationality or religious affiliation). Often we are not aware that these assumptions are there. They come to mind and are expressed in our attitude, words and actions when we speak of, encounter or interact with people in these categories. We cannot reform the structures of our society unless we first address and reform the false and often cruel assumptions we carry in our own minds. Nor can a person be harboring bigotry toward one group and in any way effectively work to end bigotry toward a different group. You cannot harbor hatred and hostility toward Christians and in any way effectively put an end to hatred or hostility toward black people. Those who stir up and manufacture hatred and blame towards one group (whom they claim to be the cause of the oppression of another group) only prove that they are well versed in the art of racism as a tool to gain power and influence.

**Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and said to it,
"I command you: come out of him and never enter him again!"
...Jesus took him by the hand, raised him, and he stood up.
...His disciples asked him, "Why could we not drive it out?"**

He said to them, "This kind can only come out through prayer." Mark 9:25-29

To cast out the unclean spirit of racism requires courageous, honest, self-examination. We must be able to recognize and name the false and irrational assumptions we harbor in our minds and hearts about people of other races, nationalities, religions, or strange appearance. Finally, we must bring them before Jesus in prayer.

I plead with you, Almighty Father, that this spirit of iniquity may no longer have any power over me. Let it be cast forth by the hand of Jesus, and nevermore return. At Your command, O Lord, and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, let there enter into me a disposition to goodness and the peace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom I have been redeemed. Let me, then, fear no evil, because the Lord, my Savior, is with me, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Catholic Faith is not an affiliation; it is a conviction. To be a Catholic is to embrace a specific body of truth that you believe will set you free to become all you were created to be and that will allow you to take your place in an integrated, living world. Catholicism is an amazing body of insight into the Truth of Things. We are not fumbling in the dark, guessing our way and hoping for the best. Nor are we powerless or alone. For a Catholic, the truth is not just something you believe, it is something you embody. Jesus said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." John 8:32