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OFFICE of the ARCHBISHOP

A Pastoral Letter on Racial Healing: “We Are One Body”

June 11, 2023

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to emulate His love and compassion for all humanity and, as sinners, to reflect on where we have fallen short. Today, I again address the grave sin of racism, which continues to plague our society and even our own Church.

Our faith teaches us that every person is created in the likeness of God and deserves to be treated with equal dignity and respect. Yet, we cannot deny that racism persists within the Body of Christ. It inflicts immense pain, division, and injustice in our Church, our communities, and our world.

Philadelphia has a long history of hometown saints who dedicated their lives to fighting racism and discrimination like Saint John Neumann, Saint Katharine Drexel, and Saint Frances Cabrini.

Despite their monumental efforts and the work of so many others, this evil continues to poison our souls, our Church, our relationships with one another, and with God. Racism shreds the fabric of our communities, hinders our unity, and impedes the building of God's kingdom on earth.

Racism denies our divine worth and violates the essence of our faith. It not only breaks Christ's commandment to love others as He loves us, but also is an offense to the presence of God within each of us.

So supreme is our Commandment to love that the Second Vatican Council asserted: “Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: ‘He who does not love does not know God.’” (1 John 4:8) (*Nostra Aetate*, 5)

The Council added: “The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion.”

Indeed, we recall that Jesus' ministry focused on the poor, the captive, the downtrodden, and the outcast. Not only did He minister to those on the margins, but they also became the very instruments by which He spread the message of salvation and love for all.

Racism is not limited to individual sin. Our Catechism tells us that such sins eventually "make men accomplices of one another," creating structures of sin that, in turn, give rise to social situations and institutions "contrary to the divine goodness." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1869*)

As my brother bishops noted in their 2018 Pastoral Letter on racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*: "Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us."

As Catholics, we are compelled to recognize that racism is a stain upon the Body of Christ – and if one part of the Body suffers, "all the parts suffer with it," St. Paul tells us. (1 Cor 12:26) That means that whatever wounds one, even if unintentional, is everyone's responsibility to heal.

I echo the sentiments of many Church leaders over the years by extending a deep apology to all who have been wounded by racist words or deeds—subtle or overt, intentional or unintentional, sins of commission and omission—particularly those committed by members of our faith community. Like the Prodigal Son, we have sinned against heaven and against you, and we ask your pardon and God's. With God's help, we resolve to do better.

To combat racism, we must embark on a journey of conversion that will require prayerful reflection, unflinching examination of conscience, and a commitment to unlearning conscious and unconscious biases that may have taken root in each of us.

Accomplishing this goal will take hard spiritual work, by each of us and by all of us. It's important to recognize that change will take time, but that should not hinder us because we know that "nothing is impossible for God." Our faith is based on hope, and hope does not disappoint.

Let us begin now. During these years of the global Synod, Pope Francis has called us to listening, dialogue, prayer, and discernment as we walk together to build the Church of tomorrow. Let us direct these same actions toward eradicating racism.

As always, we must begin with prayer. We pray for God's grace to transform our hearts and the world around us. We pray for the conversion of hearts, that all may recognize this sin and work to eradicate it. We pray for the healing of those wounded by racism, that they may find solace and support within our faith community. We pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that we may be instruments of God's love and reconciliation in the world.

Each of us must also educate ourselves about racism, its history and its ongoing effects. Many of our bishops have reflected and written extensively about this, most recently in *Open Wide Our Hearts*.

As we pray and learn, we must also act. I encourage pastors to include an anti-racism petition in their Universal Prayer and to preach against racism.

I also encourage all Catholics to seek the guidance and resources of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Commission on Racism and my own Commission on Racial Healing, which I established in 2021 to shine a light on this evil.

Like the Commission on Missionary Disciples, which I established in 2020, the Racial Healing Commission desires nothing less than a community reawakened and transformed. We cannot be "on fire for Christ" and transform others unless we ourselves have clean hearts.

I encourage parish communities to create opportunities for encounter across racial and cultural lines to better understand and appreciate the richness of diversity that God has bestowed on us. The Commission on Racial Healing will develop some of these gatherings, but parish action is crucial. These events and encounters may feel awkward at first, but we are called to love those whom we do not know.

Our Catholic community must foster a culture where open and honest conversations about race can happen. Only through dialogue can we witness the pain that racism has inflicted, the barriers we must raze, and the stereotypes we must root out. Then, and only then, can we begin the healing that Jesus commands us to undertake.

At the same time, we must look for proactive ways to imbue our parishes, schools, and Catholic organizations with a spirit of belonging, where everyone feels welcome and valued.

Reaching deeper into our communities and following the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, we must work to build a just society, seeking policies that dismantle structural injustice, supporting those who work for racial justice, and aligning with all who seek to unite our human family in a manner that is peaceful and respects the dignity of all.

May our commitment to eradicating racism be an authentic witness to our Catholic faith and a testament to the transformative power of God's grace. As God's beloved children, may we be catalysts for change, justice, and unity while building His kingdom on earth.

May the intercession of our Blessed Mother, who embraced all people as her own, guide and inspire us on this journey. May her motherly love unite us in the pursuit of justice, equality, and peace.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nelson J. Pérez". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Nelson J. Pérez, D.D.
Archbishop of Philadelphia