



# open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

## Racism and the Criminal Justice System

In the November 2018 Pastoral Letter Against Racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops urge all Catholics to acknowledge “the scourge of racism” that still exists in our hearts, words, actions, and institutions. Racism is rooted in a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of people of a different race. Racism does not reflect the inner life of God—the Triune unity of three-in-one—that we are called to imitate. Racism manifests itself in sinful individual actions, which contribute to structures of sin that perpetuate division and inequality, as has been seen throughout our nation’s history and into the present. One such structure in need of conversion is the criminal justice system.



In *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and the Criminal Justice system*, the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote, “Racism and discrimination that continue to haunt our

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*“We read the headlines that report the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement officials. In our prisons, the numbers of inmates of color, notably those who are brown and black, is grossly disproportionate. Despite the great blessings of liberty that this country offers, we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger.”*

– U.S. bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*

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nation are reflected in similar ways in the criminal justice system.” For decades, the bishops have recognized the limited utility of mandatory minimum sentencing for drug and non-violent offenses. Recognizing that the default response to social ills such as mental illness, drug addiction, homelessness, unemployment and illiteracy is too often incarceration, the bishops have advocated for sentencing reform and increased use of rehabilitative and restorative justice programs that focus on education, literacy, job-placement, and substance-abuse treatment.

Over the past four decades, there has been a 500% increase in the number of people incarcerated in the U.S., [which now totals roughly 2.2 million](#). Contributing factors to this increase include mandatory minimum

sentences, harsher sentences for non-violent drug offenses, “three-strikes” laws, and changes in policing. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. With 5% of the world’s population, the United States houses roughly 25% of the world’s prisoners.

Currently, African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos make up 56% of prisoners but are only 28% of the U.S. population. Although “color blind” on the surface, racial disparities appear in every stage of the criminal justice system, which has built the resulting prison and jail population over decades.

- Whites and African Americans engage in drug use at similar rates, but African Americans are much more likely to be arrested for it.
- Although the gap among incarceration rates of different races

has narrowed somewhat in recent years, African Americans are still incarcerated at more than five times the rate of whites.

- African Americans are more likely to experience traffic stops, searches, and juvenile arrests, and receive harsher sentences and greater length of sentencing.
- Recent headlines have also raised questions about treatment by law enforcement of persons of color, with studies pointing to racial disparities in use of non-lethal force against African Americans and Hispanics.

We must continue to work and pray against the evils of racism, particularly as it may manifest in our criminal justice system and in the way that laws are enforced.

### For More Information

- *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and the Criminal Justice*

### Pray with St. John Paul II

“Lord God, our Father, you created the human being, man and woman, in your image and likeness, and you willed the diversity of peoples within the unity of the human family. At times, however, the equality of your sons and daughters has not been acknowledged, and Christians have been guilty of attitudes of rejection and exclusion, consenting to acts of discrimination on the basis of racial and ethnic difference. Forgive us and grant us the grace to heal the wounds still present in your community on account of sin, so that we will all feel ourselves to be your sons and daughters.” (Universal Prayer on the Day of Pardon)



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