



open wide our hearts

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

Pastoral Aid: First Sunday in Advent 2018

The Catholic bishops of the United States have just released a long-anticipated pastoral letter against racism, which is an invitation for hopeful and prayerful action against the sin of racism. Called *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*, it challenges us all to do just that: open our hearts to God's transforming grace so we can transcend divisions and become one, as Christ's body is one.

Advent is the season of joyful waiting in hope. In this way, the readings this week present a particular opportunity to connect the new pastoral letter to the Scripture readings' call for action. Consider addressing one or more of the following ideas in your homily. Connecting the pastoral letter to real experiences in your parish or community at the start of the homily will help to drive the message home.

First Reading

Jeremiah 33:14-16

- In the first reading, the prophet Jeremiah writes in anticipation of a time when God's promise of justice and righteousness will be fulfilled.
- In their pastoral letter, the bishops, too, yearn for what is "right and just" in our land today. The season of Advent gives us cause for hopeful anticipation of when the Lord's justice will be fulfilled.
- We have work to do as a community of faith to promote peace and work towards the fulfillment of that promise of what is right and just. There are many examples of where evil still exists, including the pervasive reality of racism.
 - This would be a good place to refer back to an opening example you may have offered earlier of an incidence of racism you have had or experience of a parishioner that has been shared with you. Reflect on why this was an example of failing to recognize that we are all brothers and sisters, made in God's image.

"We cannot . . . look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice."

"We must be honest with ourselves. Each of us should examine our conscience and ask if the fruits of the spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control [Gal 5:22-23]) are really present in our attitudes about race. Or, rather, do our attitudes reflect mistrust, impatience, anger, distress, discomfort, or rancor?"

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

The Psalm

[Psalm 25:4-5, 8-9, 10, 14](#)

- As we seek to make room in our hearts and to take stock of our own attitudes, convictions and actions, today's Psalm provides valuable insight. The Psalmist invites us to acknowledge our dependence on God, whom we approach in prayer ("Your ways, O LORD, make known to me; teach me your paths"), to cultivate a spirit of humility ("He . . . teaches the humble his way") and to seek the truth ("Guide me in your truth and teach me.")
- Knowing that God loves each of us, we need to listen humbly in prayer in order to learn the ways each of us is called to follow God. How will we use our unique and individual gifts and talents to work for justice in our communities? The Psalmist tells us God will keep the covenant. Can we practice that same love and faithfulness to one another?

"By listening to one another's experiences, we can come to understand and to empathize, which leads to those right relationships that unite us as brothers and sisters. This justice finds its source and strength in the love of Christ who laid down his life for his friends (see Jn 15:13)."

"Each of us should adopt the words of Pope Francis as our own: let no one 'think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.' All of us are in need of personal, ongoing conversion."

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

Reading 2

[1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2](#)

- In the second reading, Paul writes of his hope that the Lord will allow the Thessalonians to increase and abound in love for each other and for all, so that their hearts will be strengthened. It is through love of God and neighbor that our hearts are strengthened.
- In the pastoral letter, the bishops urge us to put the exhortation from St. Paul into practice by finding ways to "increase and abound in love" for one another.
- How can we strengthen our love for one another by opening our hearts? One way is to listen to stories of friends and family members who have been harmed by racial or ethnic bigotry, even if those stories make us uncomfortable.

Gospel reading

Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

- Jesus tells us to be vigilant in waiting for coming of the Son of Man. Being vigilant requires us to open our hearts to our neighbor and to work for justice.
- We know that racism is an injustice that has deep veins in our culture. It creates a chasm between people, denying the human dignity of those harmed. It also “corrupts the souls of those who harbor racist or prejudicial thoughts” (*Open Wide Our Hearts*).
- We often talk about “making room” during the Advent season. What would it look like for you to make room for more love of neighbor in your life this Advent season? If we love our neighbors, that includes wanting just treatment for everyone regardless of race or ethnicity.

“This command of love can never be simply ‘live and let others be.’ The command of love requires us to make room for others in our hearts. It means that we are indeed our brother’s keeper (see Gn 4:9).”

“It is the love of Christ that binds together the Church, and this love reaches out beyond the Church to all peoples. This love also requires justice. ‘If we love others with charity,’ as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, ‘then first of all we are just toward them.’ In this way, love ‘is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace.’ In doing so, we are also loving goodness.”

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

Application

The readings this week speak of reading the signs of the world around us. We hear how God calls us to act, and to create a place where justice can take root. We need both introspection and action for putting our faith into practice.

Here are some *specific* ways that each of us can act upon the call of Scripture this week and respond to our bishops’ exhortation.

- In the parish, we all can ask ourselves:
 - Do we know, or could we find out, our parish’s history when it comes to welcoming or excluding people of color?
 - What is inviting about our parish community? What might not be welcoming if you were a newcomer and of a different ethnic background than the majority of the parishioners?
 - Do we work in our parish to empower leaders who reflect the ethnicities and cultures of people in our community?
 - How are the Church’s teachings on racism integrated into our homilies, our religious education, family ministry, and throughout parish programming?

- At home:
 - How can you increase your awareness of and appreciation for different cultural groups in your community? Where are opportunities for real and authentic dialogue?
 - True community building can feel hard and outside our comfort zone. How can you get outside your comfort zone and meet someone with a different ethnic or racial background than yours?
 - Parents: how do you talk with your children about race and the issues of racism? Children are aware of race from a very young age. We know that children learn first at home, so if you aren't talking about race at home, start. If you're not sure what to say, begin with God's love for all of his children, no matter who they are or where they come from.

- At work:
 - At work, do you speak up when you hear disparaging comments about others based on race, ethnicity or even language? What can you do to actively support celebrating diverse cultures and traditions?
 - Who has been historically excluded from decision-making conversations and leadership roles? Are there ways to authentically invite new perspectives?
 - In interviewing and hiring processes at your workplace, how can you promote including diverse candidates? Could your company actively seek candidates from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds?

- For kids:
 - If you see someone being treated differently based on their skin color or family background, do you speak up? How might you befriend that person?
 - In your school, who often sits alone at lunch or is the last one chosen for an activity? Can you choose to sit with that person or work on their team first?

Summary

In this season of Advent, let us be attuned to God's voice calling us to peace. Let us not lose sight of Christ who names, calls, and sustains us and hear the call from the bishops, "To press forward without fear also means cooperating with God's grace by taking direct and deliberate steps for change. It means opening doorways where once only walls stood" (U.S. bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*).

Bulletin Announcement

Consider including in the bulletin the following messages:

In November 2018 the Catholic bishops of the United States released a Pastoral Letter Against Racism called, *Open Wide Our Hearts*. The letter is a powerful invitation for all the people of God to “face courageously the vice of racism, . . . reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist.” At usccb.org/racism, you can read the entire letter, get new resources and find ideas for how we can respond.

Parish Activity Suggestions

If possible, use the release of the pastoral letter as an opportunity to invite greater involvement at the parish around the topic of racism. Some ideas for parish activities include:

- Hold an evening of reflection and reconciliation around the issue of racism. Use this [Prayer Service for Racial Healing in this Land](#).
- Distribute the USCCB backgrounders on [racism and employment](#), [housing](#), [wealth](#), [criminal justice](#), [voting](#), and the [Native American experience](#) as a series of [bulletin inserts](#).
- Create a discussion group to study the Pastoral Letter and discern action.
- Integrate these [Prophetic Witnesses Against Racism](#) into future homilies.
- Ask your religious education coordinator to [integrate these catechetical activities](#) into formation for youth in grades K-12.

Prayers of the Faithful for the 1st Sunday in Advent 2018

As we enter this season of joyful anticipation, let us bring to God our prayers for peace as we await the fulfillment of God's promise.

For our Church, that we may celebrate and welcome the diverse faces of Christ in our community, our worship, our ministries, and our leaders, let us pray to the Lord.

For world leaders, that they may work to end the violence perpetrated by verbal attacks, deadly weapons, and cold indifference. May our nation and countries around the world become havens of peace, let us pray to the Lord.

For our community, that we may receive the grace to see every human being as a child of God, regardless of race, language, or culture, let us pray to the Lord.

For parents and educators, that we may teach our children how to resolve differences non-violently and respectfully and have the courage to model it in our own behavior, let us pray to the Lord.

For this faith community, that we may hear the call of our leaders in the new Pastoral Letter against Racism to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to act together to end violence and racism, let us pray to the Lord.

For our public officials, that the Spirit of Wisdom may help them strive to work for equal education, suitable housing, and equal employment opportunities for all, let us pray to the Lord.

For solidarity in our global human family, that we may be vigilant in our protection of those who are most vulnerable and most in need, let us pray to the Lord.

For those who have died, especially those who have died in the pursuit of justice, may they be welcomed into the great glory of God's love, let us pray to the Lord.

Loving God, whose promise of justice sustains us,
as we await your coming at Christmas,
hear these our prayers that we might ready our hearts and our communities
for the coming of Christ, our example in all things.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.



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