
PASTORAL LETTERS

of the United States
Catholic Bishops

VOLUME III
1962-1974

National Conference of Catholic Bishops
United States Catholic Conference



Pastoral Statement on Race Relations and Poverty

*A Statement Issued by the National Conference
of Catholic Bishops*

November 19, 1966

1. The pastoral concern of the bishops of the United States goes to the poor in our midst, particularly to those who have felt the heavy burden of discrimination. This means, in our day, racial discrimination.
2. These are turbulent days, marked by severe social strains and civic clashes. We are grateful that much progress in civil rights legislation has been made in recent years. Laws have been passed to eliminate discrimination in our nation and to open voting to all. We urge the vigorous use of all legal means to assure their prompt implementation.
3. Comprehensive programs to eradicate poverty have been begun. We ask for strong and continuing support for them and constant efforts to improve them. However, the great task of changing the hearts of men on the subject of equal rights for all requires more than laws and programs. It needs above all a true sense of neighborliness, based upon a religiously inspired conviction that all men are equal before God and that all should be welcomed in our midst.
4. We note with sorrow that civil strife is an ever-present danger. There have been riots in our cities. Racial antagonism has been fostered and continues to be fostered under many emotionally charged and irrational slogans. Moreover, we are still confronted with the depressing problems of poverty, joblessness, and urban and rural slums.

Suffering Minorities

5. As American citizens, we deplore the fact that such conditions exist in a nation so endowed with wealth. As Christian leaders, we must repeat the constant refrain of recent popes and of Vatican Council II, that material goods are held in stewardship for the welfare of all men. Destitution and degrading, avoidable poverty hurt family life, blight the promise of youth, and lead to a bitter harvest of sickness, delinquency, and crime.
6. The problem of poverty is inflicted particularly upon minority groups in our society. The Negro, the Spanish-speaking, and the Indian suffer inordinately under this burden. Nearly half the members of these groups live in poverty. Their unemployment rate is

double the national average. They are far more likely than others to be condemned to urban or rural slums.

7. While there are many causes of poverty, most are connected with past or present discrimination. Hence, we affirm once again, as we did in our Statement of 1958 and our Letter of 1963, and on many occasions in the pronouncements of Vatican Council II, that discrimination based on race, language, religion, or national origins is contrary to right reason and to Christian teaching.

8. We are all the children of God. We share the same rights before God and man. All men of good will desire that the doors of opportunity be opened equally to all who are their brothers under one eternal Father.

9. These statements of principles are so clear and so widely accepted that it is not necessary to dwell upon them here. Our present concern is to reduce principles to action, ideals to programs. In light of these considerations, we respectfully propose the following pastoral suggestions. While these are general in nature, it is our hope that they can be translated, in our cities and throughout our nation, into specific and workable social programs.

10. First, in the current discussion of racial tensions slogans have at times taken the place of reasonable dialogue. We ask that dialogue replace slogans. It would be tragic were our nation to suffer a deepening of the cleavages along racial or economic lines, with shouted epithets of hate replacing reasoned discourse.

11. Since the aggrieved in our nation are mostly the poor and the members of minority groups, it is the clear duty of those who have jobs and status to talk openly and freely to those who have been less fortunate. We must learn, and learn firsthand, what it is to be a poor Negro, a neglected Spanish-American, or a disfranchised Indian.

Beginning of Solution

12. Open discussion of these problems is the beginning of their solution. It is our hope that all our Catholic people will join with their Christian and Jewish brothers, and indeed with all men of good will, in common projects which affirm and realize the dignity of all men.

13. Second, we ask that a concentrated attack upon poverty be mounted upon many fronts. This is a complex problem and its solutions are equally complex. There is work that can be done by individuals, by religious groups, and by the community organizations.

14. Other aspects of this problem require a strong governmental intervention at appropriate levels. We wish to suggest certain objectives that seem to us paramount at this time and which require adaptation to different places in their application.

15. Foremost among these is the quality of education given to the poor. The poorly educated child and the school dropout face life with almost insuperable handicaps in our society. Communities should be concerned about the quality of teachers, schools, guidance programs, and the supplementary aids needed by all children.

16. Adult education is also a great necessity. Citizens in every city, and in our rural areas, should examine critically the type of education afforded to the poor at all age levels and act decisively to make educational opportunities equal for all.

17. Next, we should be concerned with the type and quality of assistance available to poor families. Where welfare relief is necessary, it should be given in a context that favors family stability and respects the human dignity of those who cannot earn their living. Such programs should help maintain the father in the home and be joined, where need be, with training facilities to enable the unemployed to secure gainful work. These programs should offer incentives to part-time or temporary employment, often refused today because of regulations that penalize such efforts.

18. A key concern is job opportunity. This problem has two main facets: realistic training joined with proper motivation and the willingness of employers to hire and promote without discrimination. Unions likewise should open their membership rolls to all without discrimination. We especially compliment those employers and unions which have agreed to take affirmative actions to secure a fully integrated working force. Such open attitudes best express the Christian response to racial discrimination.

Problem of Housing

19. Finally, there is the problem of adequate housing. Millions of Americans live in overcrowded substandard homes. Under such conditions, it is difficult to promote sound family life, to encourage education, or to bring about stable, peaceful neighborhoods.

20. Our citizens, our civic groups, and our churches should be eager to use the opportunities they now have to promote low-cost housing for the poor, to build well-planned public housing units, and to rehabilitate rundown neighborhoods.

21. But this is only part of the task. As our nation becomes increasingly suburban, industry and service occupations are expanding far more rapidly in the suburbs than in our inner cities. We cannot hope to solve the problem of joblessness in our cities if men and women are denied the opportunity of living near possible places where work is available.

22. While the issue of fair housing has been the source of grave tensions in some parts of our nation, conditions have noticeably

improved in certain areas. We urge support for sound programs to assure equal housing opportunities for all, without discrimination based on race, creed, or color. Here is a unique chance for responsible dialogue, for learning from successes and from failures, and thus constructing harmonious communities in every part of our nation.

23. We ask these steps out of our pastoral concern for all who are in need. In this world, under God's providence, our nation has been cast into a position of world leadership. This stems in part from our economic and military power, but it is also a recognition of certain unique elements in our democracy. More than most peoples in recorded history, we have striven to make all men equal under law.

24. Today the world watches us anxiously, as it reads of racial struggles and tensions and learns about poverty in an affluent society. If men elsewhere become disillusioned with our democracy, they are offered the choice of another powerful system which also promises equality, but at the sacrifice of basic freedoms.

25. Ours is a fateful choice, one which can decide the destiny, not merely of this American nation, but possibly of the entire world. In this instance at least, what is morally right is a political imperative. Prayerfully, we commend these thoughts to our Catholic people and to all our fellow citizens who share our hopes.