



# open wide our hearts

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

## Racism and Employment

In the November 2018 Pastoral Letter Against Racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the Catholic bishops of the United States urge all Catholics to acknowledge “the scourge of racism” that still exists in our hearts, words, actions, and institutions. Racism can be individual, when persons fail to recognize certain groups as created in the image of God and equal in dignity, or it can be systemic, where practices or policies treat certain groups of people unjustly. One area of systemic racism is lack of access to equal employment opportunities for many persons of color.



Saint John Paul II [reminded us](#) that due to every person being created in the image and likeness of God, everyone who is willing and able should have access to opportunities for fair employment. Unfortunately, this was not the case for Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and many immigrants throughout the nation’s history—and fair access to employment remains a challenge today.

For Native Americans, [colonial and later U.S. policies](#) led to the loss of land,

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*“All too often, Hispanics and African Americans ... face discrimination in hiring, housing, educational opportunities, and incarceration.”*

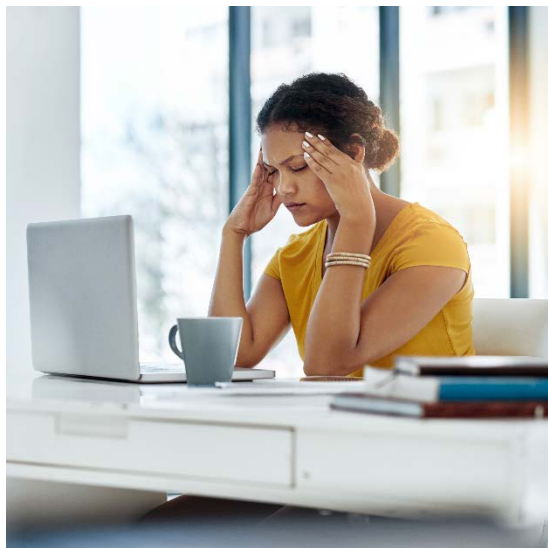
– U.S. bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*

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restrictions in self-governance, and economic devastation that left a legacy of low educational attainment and [unemployment rates](#) which remain among the highest in the country. Throughout its history, the United States has, especially during times of economic stress, [discriminated against and placed legal restrictions on newly arrived groups of immigrants](#) and blamed them for social ills. The blame, discrimination and legal restrictions were detrimental to the impacted groups and led to restricted access to employment opportunities and other means of advancement.

After the end of slavery until the First World War, [90% of African Americans lived in the South](#), the great majority toiling as sharecroppers. This entailed back-breaking labor in white landowners’ fields for a small share of the crop and often substandard housing. In addition, the imposition of [Jim Crow](#), which guaranteed segregation and disenfranchisement, [was ample impetus to leave the South for good](#). With the start of WWI in 1916, the [Great Migration](#) brought black laborers north to work in factories.

However, they faced many challenges. Many white residents in northern cities resented the new black residents, and tensions could spill over into violence and riots. Despite higher available salaries than those in the South, black migrants to the North were typically relegated to lower paying jobs. The Great Depression further eroded job possibilities. Even with post-Depression economic recovery, many labor unions that secured just wages were closed to African Americans, as were many professions. Even college-educated African Americans often found limited entry-level employment. Unemployment, under-employment, and discrimination in the workplace were the norm.



Part of the Civil Rights agenda in the 1960s was focused on jobs with dignity and job training opportunities. The U.S. Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created in 1964 to protect against illegal discrimination in the workplace, which unfortunately has continued. In 2016 and 2017, for example, the EEOC investigated tens of thousands of racial discrimination cases. Employment disparities among college graduates of different races persist.

In 2017 the Harvard University Business School Review documented that hiring discrimination against African Americans was still a reality—and did not decline in the past 25 years. The authors note that despite a growing concern with diversity, “subtle forms of racial stereotypes” in the workplace and “unconscious bias” have shown little change: support for more affirmative action policies and stronger enforcement of antidiscrimination legislation is critical because this pattern “will not diminish on its own.” The unemployment rate among African American workers and Hispanic workers is still higher than for whites, and in 14 states and the District of Columbia, black unemployment is at least twice as high as white unemployment. Native American communities often have vastly higher unemployment than the national average. Unequal opportunity still remains a concern.

### Pray with St. John Paul II

“Lord God, our Father, you created the human being, man and women, 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” ( )

