



open wide our hearts

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

Study Guide

Introduction

In November 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops approved a new pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*. In the letter, the bishops invite all people of faith to conversion. We are called to open our minds and hearts to Christ's love for all people and to the experiences of those who have been harmed by the evil of racism.

*"The Christian community should draw from this **central, ongoing encounter with Christ** and seek to combat racism with love."*

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

The letter and this accompanying study guide are for everyone. The process of praying through, reflecting upon, and acting upon the message of the pastoral letter is hard work, but it is work from which all will benefit. As the bishops write, "Each of us should adopt the words of Pope Francis as our own: let no one 'think this invitation is not meant for him or her.'" We are all in need of "a genuine conversion of heart" and we must all actively participate in reforming those institutions and structures that still perpetuate racial inequality and harm our sisters and brothers. The bishops write, "Finally, too often racism comes in the form of the sin of omission, when individuals, communities, and even churches remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when it is encountered."

All who seek to open wide their hearts through prayerful engagement with this letter are invited to pray, listen, study, reflect, and respond. This study guide and the resources within are designed to complement the pastoral letter and will aid in grasping the spirit and intent of the letter.

Pray

Prayer is the foundation for a strong faith life. We must begin with listening through prayer if we are to hear how God is truly calling us to respond in love. Our lives of prayer help us to know Jesus more deeply and hear more clearly how he calls us. Prayer can open our hearts to conversion, even in unexpected places. The pastoral letter invites readers into conversion, and we must prepare our hearts for conversion through prayer. Several resources, including this [scripture reflection](#) and this [examination of conscience](#) are available at usccb.org/racism and can be utilized prior to reading the letter.

Listen

Many members of the body of Christ have suffered the pain of racism. In *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the bishops invite us to create opportunities to see Christ in our neighbors and to listen to their stories and experiences. As you prepare to read and reflect on the pastoral letter, it is critical to find opportunities to hear the real-life experiences of others. These experiences can make the message of the pastoral letter tangible and help prepare you to receive it.

How and where can you hear these stories and experiences? These recent articles describe experiences with racism in the Church:

- [Bishops hear pain, hope at racism listening session in Baltimore](#)
- [At Ohio listening session, participants express sorrow and hope](#)
- [Racism severely wounded lives of people of color](#)
- [Black Catholics offer insights on addressing racism](#)

If you are studying the pastoral letter as an individual or family, think about how you can expand your awareness. If you have friends who are from cultural backgrounds different than your own, ask them to share their experiences with you. If you live, work, worship, or spend your free time in places where most people look like you, be intentional about expanding your circle and creating opportunities to form relationships with others. Become familiar with media sources frequented by other cultures. Visit cultural institutions such as museums commemorating the experiences of people of cultures different than your own. Invite people from different cultural backgrounds to church gatherings, bible studies, and social events and focus on listening and learning from them.

*“As Christians, **we are called to listen and know the stories** of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved to empathy to promote justice.”*

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

If you are studying *Open Wide Our Hearts* as part of a group, the facilitator should create opportunities for storytelling and sharing experiences as part of or in preparation for your study of the pastoral letter.

Study and Reflect

This study guide is divided into several sections that correspond with the sections of the pastoral letter. Use the prompts on the pages that follow to know where to start, what background information to explore, and how to reflect, as individual or with a group, on what you are learning.

For those studying the pastoral letter in groups, it may be helpful to seek out resources on how to ensure a respectful conversation.

Respond

In *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the bishops call for “concrete action” by individuals, families, parishes, schools, and organizations to seek justice and right relationship in our communities. You can use this [Process for Group Discernment](#) to help identify the best ways to respond together. (Some of the questions in the resource can be helpful for individuals as well.) Links to examples of how other faith communities are putting faith in action to address racism are also provided on the last page of this guide.



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Introduction, What is Racism?

Read the Introduction and “What Is Racism?” sections of [Open Wide Our Hearts](#) (pp. 1-5 of the [print booklet](#)). The questions that follow can help you as you read.

Introduction

In the Introduction to *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the U.S. bishops remind us that because of God’s great love, we are all his children. Through Christ’s Death and resurrection, we are united to the Father, but the world is still affected by the evil of racism.

“Racism still profoundly affects our culture, and it has no place in the Christian heart.”

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

What Is Racism?

In this section, the bishops define racism and give examples of its manifestation in attitudes, convictions, and actions. They distinguish individual racism from institutional racism and discuss why racism contradicts Christ’s plan for humanity.

Before You Read

- At usccb.org/racism, 2-pagers exploring many aspects of institutional or systemic racism are available: [What Is Systemic Racism?](#) | [Racism and Economic Inequality](#) | [Racism and Education](#) | [Racism and Employment](#) | [Racism and Housing](#) | [Racism and the Criminal Justice System](#) | [Racism and the Native American Experience](#) | [Racism and Voting](#) | [Racism and Immigration](#)
- It is essential to hear the real-life stories of people who have experienced individual and institutional racism. Consult the “Listen” suggestions in the opening pages of this study guide. These real-life experiences can inform your reading of this section.

Questions

1. How do the bishops define racism? Does their definition resonate with your experiences?
2. Why are racist acts sinful? What forms of racism does the pastoral letter outline?
3. The bishops write that racist convictions or attitudes can result in exclusion, ridicule, mistreatment, or discrimination. What examples of this have you seen or experienced?
4. The bishops note, “Racism can be found in our hearts.” Take a few minutes to examine your own conscience. [Use the examination of conscience featured in this prayer service.](#) What positive or negative generalizations have you made about different ethnic groups? How can such generalizations lead to negative outcomes or interactions with individuals you encounter from these particular groups in your day to day life?
5. What is institutional or systemic racism? What are examples? (For help, see the series of 2-pagers on systemic racism in the “Before You Read” section, above.) Are there examples of systemic racism in your community (i.e., historically redlined neighborhoods lead to segregated cities and unequal access to education)?
6. Why is racism at odds with the Christian vision for our families, communities, and society?

Go Deeper

1. What must a person do in order to do justice, love goodness, and to walk humbly with God?



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Study Guide: Do Justice

Read the “Do Justice” section of [Open Wide Our Hearts](#) (pp. 5-12 of the [print booklet](#)). The questions that follow can help you as you read.

Do Justice

In this section, the bishops begin by reflecting on the truth of the dignity of each and every person, created in God’s image. They describe the scriptural call to work towards right relationship with God, one another, and creation. They note that while progress has been made in civil law regarding racism, we are still far from overcoming racism in our country. We must listen to and know the stories of our brothers and sisters with open hearts. Finally, the bishops provide an overview of the historical experiences with racism of three groups in the United States: Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics.

“We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just.”

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

Before You Read

- [Resources](#) on the Native American experience
- [Resources](#) on the African American experience
- [Racism and Immigration](#) backgrounder
- [Encountering Christ in Harmony: A Pastoral Response to Our Asian and Pacific Island Brothers and Sisters](#) (see especially pp. 16-19)
- [Resource page](#) on diverse ethnic communities and people on the move
- [Backgrounders](#) on systemic racism

Questions

1. Describe the scriptural vision of right relationship. What do you think “right relationship” looks like? How well do the bishops believe we are living up to that vision when it comes to racism?
2. How has racism harmed Native Americans and their communities? What do you know about the Boarding School period in U.S. history?
3. What harms to African Americans do the bishops lament, repent or ask forgiveness for and what effects of slavery do the bishops acknowledge still exist in the African American community?
4. How have many Hispanics experienced racism?
5. What are some of the reasons cited that explain why the evil of racism still festers in the United States?
6. Why is it important to “hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the hearts of our brothers and sisters” who have experienced racism? What stories have you heard that have expanded your own perspective? If you have heard stories that broadened your perspective, how do you retain the lessons you have learned from those stories?

Go Deeper

1. African Americans and Native Americans share many common experiences in our country. What are those common experiences?
2. How does racism influence U.S. immigration policy?
3. Pages 16-19 of *Encountering Christ in Harmony* describe prejudice and marginalization experienced by many Asian and Pacific Islanders. How has racism been directed at these communities?



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Study Guide: Love Goodness

Read the “Love Goodness” section of [Open Wide Our Hearts](#) (pp. 12-16 of the [print booklet](#)). The questions that follow can help you as you read.

Love Goodness

In this section, the bishops encourage us to examine our conscience and be honest about our attitudes on race. They reflect on Jesus’s command of love and what it requires: justice. “Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously,” they write. This includes individual conversion and work to change unjust policies and structures. Ven. Augustus Tolton and St. Katharine Drexel are two holy individuals who responded to this call.

*“We must be honest with ourselves. Each of us should **examine our conscience** and ask if these fruits are really present in our attitudes about race.”*

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

Before You Read

- Use this handout to understand how your own conscious or subconscious perceptions about others may lead to attitudes of prejudice.
- This reflection on [Praying for Racial Healing in Our Land](#) can help you prayerfully examine your heart and acknowledge past failures. For group settings, use the [Prayer Service on Racial Healing in Our Land](#).
- Learn about the prophetic witness against racism of [several holy men and women cited in the pastoral letter](#).

Questions

1. Take several minutes to reflect upon or journal about how the Holy Spirit may be speaking to you in your own examination of conscience about your attitudes on race.
2. How are you “opening wide” your heart and responding to Jesus’s command of love? Does your prayer life reflect a response to Jesus’s command of love?
3. Do you believe that Jesus really can heal the divisions and wounds caused by racism in an individual? In a community? On a national level?

4. How might you be called to help others recognize racism affecting our communities?
5. In what ways does combatting racism require overcoming racial prejudice *and* challenging social structures that subtly embody and reinforce racism?
6. How do the stories of Ven. Augustus Tolton and St. Katharine Drexel inspire or challenge you? How can you follow their example in your own journey to be a disciple of Christ?



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Study Guide: Walk Humbly with God

Read the “Walk Humbly with God” section of [Open Wide Our Hearts](#) (pp. 16-27 of the [print booklet](#)). The questions that follow can help you as you read. Finally, be sure to use the final section to discern what steps God might be calling you to in response to the pastoral letter.

Walk Humbly with God

In this section the bishops exhort all Catholics to cooperate with God’s grace to take direct and deliberate steps to help end racism. They urge all Catholics to examine their hearts and repent of any sinfulness. They acknowledge the Church’s complicity in evil of racism and ask forgiveness from all who have been harmed by these sins.

Second, the bishops urge all to continually encounter others from different backgrounds. We are encouraged to build relationships and talk with those with whom we may not ordinarily engage. Out of those relationships we must resolve to work for justice interpersonally and beyond. The bishops list numerous ways that dioceses, seminaries, parishes, educational institutions, organizations, families, and individuals can educate themselves, work institutionally, and change unjust structures. Finally, they reflect on racism as a life issue and pray for the intercession of Mary for the grace to overcome the evil of racism and build a just society.

“We ask [all Catholics] to fight the evil of racism by educating themselves, reflecting on their personal thoughts and actions, listening to the experience of those who have been affected by racism, and by developing and supporting programs that help repair the damages caused by racial discrimination.”

– U.S. bishops, Open Wide Our Hearts

Questions

1. What is the relationship between evangelization and racism?
2. How is fighting racism part of missionary discipleship? How will an encounter with Christ help individuals combat racism?

3. Based on which wrongs do the bishops acknowledge the Catholic Church has been complicit in perpetuating racism?
4. The bishops state that racism is a life issue. Why is racism a life issue?
5. What does St. John Paul II say about the “supernatural vocation” to which we are all called?
6. The bishops invite all Catholics to cooperate with God’s grace to fight the evil of racism by **educating** yourself, **reflecting** on your personal thoughts and actions, **listening** to the experiences of those affected by racism, and developing and supporting programs to help **repair the damages** caused by racial discrimination. How will you implement each of these invitations?

Go Deeper

1. Have you ever accompanied a person who you know harbors racist thoughts on his or her journey of conversion? If not, is there anyone in your life that God might be calling you to accompany on this journey? If so, how did you see the Lord working through your relationship?
2. In your community, how can you help to welcome, encounter, protect, and help newcomers from cultural groups different than your own?
3. Create a list of some local historical or educational sites that you could visit to learn about relevant cultural events and history in your area. Plan to visit one next month.
4. In your opinion, what are the three most critical actions that the Church and its members should take to end racism internally? What should racial justice look like in the Church, specifically in parishes, schools, and organizations?
5. What are the three most critical actions that should be taken in the wider society?

Next Steps

You can respond to the message of *Open Wide Our Hearts* by considering the following actions:

- Talk to your parish or school about offering training for [Intercultural Competence](#), and read [this series](#) about implementing the USCCB training.
- Work with leaders in your faith community to host a listening session on racism. Examples are in the “Listen” section of the introduction to this study guide.
- Meet with the Director of Religious Education at your parish or the principal of your parish school to share [these resources for grades K-12](#) on *Open Wide Our Hearts*. These resources connect concepts in the pastoral letter with doctrinal elements and Catechetical concepts taught at each grade level.
- If you used this Study Guide as part of a group, use this [Process for Group Discernment](#) to assist your group in identifying the best ways to act together.



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