



Catholic Identity and Racial Diversity

A Framework for Catholic Institutions Committed to Racial Justice, Reconciliation, and the Gospel

The Church teaches that diversity is a gift from God—a reflection of the richness of His creation. Human beings differ in countless ways, and yet all are made in the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*).

This backgrounder can help Catholics reflect on why a commitment to racial diversity is rooted in our faith, and why and how Catholic institutions are called to welcome and actively promote and embrace the diversity of human life.

Scriptural Reflection: 1 Cor. 12

Unity in diversity is central to understanding the nature and mission of the Church. The Church is one body made up of many parts ([1 Corinthians 12:12-27](#)). Each person and culture brings something valuable to the Body of Christ. As St. Paul teaches, the Church is one body with many members, each uniquely gifted and indispensable. “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?” (v.17). In this passage, St. Paul names the hand, the foot, the ear, and the eye—not simply as symbols, but as reminders that no part of the body can say to another, “I have no need of you” (v.21). The message is clear: when any member is excluded, diminished, or unseen, the entire body suffers.

This Scriptural image speaks directly to our Catholic institutions. A commitment to racial diversity is not optional: the diversity present in the body of Christ is an expression of our identity as the People of God. To be Catholic is to be universal, to reflect the fullness of God’s creation and the richness of the human family. When our communities and institutions fail to honor and include the cultural, racial, and ethnic identities of all God’s children, we distort the image of the Body of Christ.

We are reminded that the Spirit bestows countless gifts, expressed through the beauty of many cultures. These gifts are not uniform, but beautifully varied, just as the Holy Spirit breathes life into diverse cultural traditions, languages, and expressions of faith. In honoring these traditions, we deepen our understanding of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God present in every person.

Racial Diversity in Catholic Institutions

Catholic institutions must therefore be places where diversity is celebrated as a reflection of divine creativity, and where all are empowered to bring their gifts to the table. Only then can we truly live as one body, animated by one Spirit, called to one hope in Christ.

Catholic institutions, including schools, parishes, and others, are not isolated from society but deeply immersed in it. In his Apostolic Letter, *Disegnare Nuove Mappe Di Speranza*, Pope Leo XIV noted that Catholic educational institutions must be open and collaborative (no. 8.3). As part of their mission to serve the Church and all God’s people, they are called to be



instruments of evangelization. Schools and universities help the Church to engage in rigorous academic, theological, and sociological thought about the most pressing issues of our time (*Disegnare Nuove Mappe Di Speranza*, no. 1.3). One of the most persistent and pressing issues continues to be racial injustice—a reality that all Catholic institutions must wrestle with. In the pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the U.S. bishops call on “religious education programs, Catholic schools and Catholic publishing companies to develop curricula relating to racism and reconciliation” and “to break any silence around the issue of racism, to find new and creative ways to raise awareness on this topic (p. 26).

The bishops noted that “To work at ending racism, we need to engage the world and encounter others—to see, maybe for the first time, those who are on the peripheries of our own limited view” (p. 23). Catholic institutions must value racial diversity and work to ensure that the perspectives of its culturally diverse members are heard in the institution’s membership, leadership, governance and decision-making. Ensuring that culturally diverse voices are represented at the table is a matter of justice. This also means that we should seek to be accessible to people of diverse cultural backgrounds, and to serve communities on the margins in society, as was the root of Catholic education in the United States (*Disegnare Nuove Mappe Di Speranza*, no. 10.4).

As members of the Body of Christ, we are called to recognize and respond to the dignity of every person, particularly those who have been historically excluded, and those who continue to be intentionally or unintentionally underserved. To serve the People of God is to ensure that our ministries reflect Christ’s preferential option for the poor and embody the inclusive love of the Gospel. Our institutions must confront the historical and systemic roots of racial injustice and be willing to name uncomfortable truths, such as the persistence of racism within Church structures, systems, and broader society, and to advocate for transformative change, even when such truths challenge public opinion or institutional comfort. Catholic institutions are poised to bring the best of our Catholic faith and intellectual tradition to bear on the signs of our times. Throughout time, Catholic institutions have often led the way in finding common ground, offering new ideas and solutions to social issues. The Catholic intellectual tradition is at its best when many racially diverse communities and backgrounds are represented, not only in its teachings but in its reception and participation.

To safeguard the authentic good of society, Catholic institutions must cultivate environments where all racial and cultural identities are honored, where racial inequity is actively combatted, and where disciples are formed in moral courage. This is part of our witness to the Gospel: to build communities that reflect the justice, dignity, and unity of the Kingdom of God (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, no. 32).

Racial Diversity and Catholic Social Teaching

In an effort to further assist institutions, the following specific examples are ways that the body of Catholic Social Teaching contributes to the Church’s recognition of the God-given human dignity of all people from every cultural family.



- Catholic Social Teaching calls us to uphold the dignity of every person and to build communities rooted in justice, participation, and solidarity. When we examine racial diversity through this lens, we are not simply addressing social trends—we are responding to a Gospel mandate. The Church teaches that racism is a sin that wounds the human family and denies the image of God in others. Therefore, our institutions must reflect the love of Christ in how we welcome, empower, and honor people of all racial and cultural backgrounds.
- The Church also teaches that authentic human thriving requires being able to participate in family and community. We should ask: who is missing? Catholic institutions are called to be places where all people, cultures, and ethnicities—especially those historically excluded—can contribute, lead, and flourish. This means examining not only who is present in our pews and classrooms, but also who holds decision-making power, whose voices shape our mission, and whose traditions enrich our worship.
- The principle of solidarity also reminds us that we are one human family. Racial diversity is not about quotas or appearances—it is about justice, healing, and shared responsibility. When we embrace the racially diverse gifts of our community, we reflect the fullness of the Body of Christ and move closer to the beloved community God desires.

Diversity in Practice

The Catholic Church is universally inclusive—it embraces people from all nations, languages, and backgrounds who join themselves to immutable, timeless truths ([Revelation 7:9](#)). As one expression of this, racial diversity is reflected in the liturgy. Mission and inculturation are key: the Gospel and liturgical practice are adapted to diverse cultures without compromising its truth. The Church maintains that truth and charity must guide how diversity is understood and practiced. Diversity is the God-given reality of the human family’s variety in culture, language, gifts, and experiences, which, when embraced in the light of Christ, reflects the unity and beauty of God’s plan for creation and the Church.

Catholic institutions also operate in the context of modern American law. Without compromising on doctrine, the Church’s commitment to the equal dignity of every person is consistent with lawful ways of advancing the Church’s educational mission through targeted outreach and recruitment, increasing opportunities to identify talent, providing support based on need, cultivating a celebration of diversity in our institutions, and other such means of ensuring that people of all races find their home in the Church.

Questions for Reflection and Institutional Discernment

These questions might be helpful as institutions consider how they can together live out the reality of our call as the People of God, united in our diversity.

1. Does our institution reflect the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the surrounding community? If not, what barriers exist—and how can we begin to transform them?



2. Do we actively honor and celebrate the ethnic and cultural identities present within our community? How are these reflected in our liturgies, events, and curriculum?
3. In leadership, governance, and decision-making, who is missing from the table? What steps can we take to ensure more inclusive representation?
4. Do our worship experiences allow for cultural expressions of faith that reflect and uplift the communities we serve?
5. How do our policies, hiring practices, and outreach efforts reflect a commitment to providing “opportunities for qualified candidates who historically have been excluded” because of their race or ethnicity (*Open Wide Our Hearts*, p. 24)?



USCCB Documents

- [*Brothers and Sisters to Us*](#) (USCCB, 1979)
 - The bishops declare racism to be a sin that divides the human family, denies the image of God in others, and violates human dignity.
 - The bishops urge Catholics to “resist and undo injustices,” even if they are not personally responsible for creating them.
 - They emphasize that silence and indifference make one complicit in the sin of racism.
- [*What We Have Seen and Heard*](#) (USCCB, 1984)
 - The letter urges Black Catholics to share their cultural and spiritual gifts with the wider Church, emphasizing that the Church is universal, not uniform. Diversity is seen as a strength that enriches the whole Body of Christ.
- [*Open Wide Our Hearts*](#) (USCCB, 2018)
 - The pastoral letter also points to systemic manifestations of racism: from wage theft and other worker abuses towards migrants to inequitable access to quality education or housing. The bishops call for conversion of our hearts, and all that perpetuates racism.
- [*Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*](#) (USCCB, 2020)
 - Includes the history of racism affecting Hispanic/Latino immigrants: “Since the Mexican American War, Hispanics from various countries have experienced discrimination in housing, employment, healthcare, and education. Hispanics have been referred to by countless derogatory names, have encountered negative assumptions made about them because of their ethnicity, and have suffered discrimination in applying for college, for housing, and in registering to vote. Despite their sizable share of the U.S. workforce and their numerous contributions to the U.S. economy in many different fields and industries, the large income gap between Hispanic and European Americans points to the persistence of certain discriminatory practices in employment and pay” (pp. 15-16).

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)

- [CCC 1934–1938](#): Emphasizes the equality of all people before God while acknowledging unjust inequalities and calling for solidarity and justice.
- [CCC 814](#): Describes the unity of the Church as existing within a rich diversity of gifts, offices, cultures, and ways of life.

Magisterial Teaching and Documents

- [*Pacem in Terris*](#) (1963)
 - Pope John XXIII insists that peace must be built on truth, justice, charity, and liberty, and he outlines a vision of fundamental human rights that belong to all people without distinction (nos. 13, 20, 21, 26, 34).



- *Gaudium et Spes* (1965)
 - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World
 - Highlights the importance of cultural diversity and the dignity of every person.
 - Encourages mutual respect and dialogue among people (no. 61).
- *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971)
 - Paul VI condemns discrimination “on account of their race, origin, color, culture, sex or religion.” It highlights racial discrimination as a pressing issue, noting the tensions it creates both nationally and internationally, and affirms that all members of humanity share the same rights and destiny (no. 16).
- *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004)
 - Justice, dignity, and preferential option for the poor (nos. 35, 107, 145).
- *Caritas in Veritate* (2009)
 - Affirms the value of cultural, social, and economic diversity, emphasizing that development must respect the unique identity of peoples and cultures (no. 32).
 - Pope Benedict stresses that true development must be rooted in openness to others, dialogue, and mutual enrichment—recognizing that diversity, when guided by truth and charity, enhances human flourishing (no. 42).
- *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013)
 - Calls the Church to be open to the cultural richness of all people (no. 53).
 - Emphasizes the need to “rejoice in diversity” while maintaining unity in essentials (no. 116).
- *Fratelli Tutti* (2020)
 - Reaffirms that human fraternity and social friendship must transcend national and cultural boundaries (no. 118).
 - Promotes respect for differences as essential to peace and solidarity.