



United States
Conference of
Catholic Bishops

Subcommittee for the
Promotion of Racial Justice
and Reconciliation



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Subcommittee on
African American
Affairs

The Treasures of Memory: A Reflection on Truth-Telling
“The power of memory is great, very great, my God.”- St. Augustine

“An honest look at the past makes plain the need for restitution wherever possible - makes evident the justice of restoration and redistribution.” - U.S. Catholic Bishops, [Brothers and Sisters to Us](#) (1979)

As shepherds of the Church, entrusted with the care of souls and the proclamation of the Gospel, we care deeply for our people, their joys and sorrows, and the stories they carry. This is especially important in our efforts to witness to the dignity of every person, which requires acknowledging the times in our nation’s history when racism has prevented that dignity from being realized. This reflection is about the sacred task of remembering. We must recommit ourselves to the sacred task of remembering—especially the stories of those whose voices have long been unheard. Sacred Scripture and Tradition offer a way forward for helping us understand why telling our stories is central to the Gospel mandate.

We must continue to tell those aspects of our national history—particularly those that recount the suffering of enslaved Africans, Indigenous people, and other ethnic groups which have been marginalized. For Catholics, the telling and sharing of history is how we share experiences of God, community, and culture. “The memory of the dark chapters of America's history, involving the practice of slavery and other situations of social discrimination, must awaken a sincere desire for conversion leading to reconciliation and communion” ([Ecclesia in America](#), n. 58). We have witnessed that when the truth is withheld or not told, then there are no opportunities for true authentic reconciliation and healing to occur. Museums, monuments, sculptures, and works of art—whether expressed through prose, poetry, or performance—may stir memories that are difficult to bear—yet they are not meant to assign blame to those who were not responsible for past injustices. Rather, they invite us to renew our commitment to authentic justice, reconciliation, and healing. In remembering, we do not remain bound by the past; instead, we learn from it, allowing it to shape who we are today—whether because of it or in spite of it—so that we may walk forward together with hope and honor.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops affirmed the dignity of truth telling, and the consequences when the truth is ignored in [Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love](#), stating: “When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred.”

Let us therefore remember: the true treasure that lies in the collective experiences of God’s people. The Catholic tradition honors the inherent dignity of every person and the sacred stories of every people. We must tell the whole story—even when it is uncomfortable—because only the truth can set us free ([John 8:32](#)).

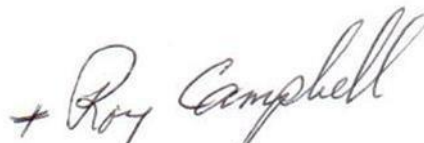
Truth-telling is not an act of division—it is an act of liberation. In his reflection on *Dilexit nos*, Bishop Joseph N. Perry wrote: “When we have the courage to name and acknowledge past wrongs, we open the door for reparations. We see signs of hope where communities regularly recognize the harm of racism and collectively enter into prayer and conversation.” Within the Black Catholic community, this sacred duty to remember is a form of spiritual resistance—a refusal to let injustice have the final word. “Blacks and other minorities still remain absent from many aspects of Catholic life and are only meagerly represented on the decision-making level. Inner-city schools continue to disappear and Black vocational recruitment lacks sufficient support...Racism, at once subtle and mased, still festers within our Church as within our society”(What We Have Seen and Heard).

The Church is not immune to difficult moments in history. We must face with humility and sorrow the wounds inflicted within our own ecclesial communities. In the South, many Black Catholics endured segregation within their parishes—relegated to separate seating, delayed access to Holy Communion, and treated as second-class members of the Body of Christ. These practices sowed division and contradicted the very heart of the Gospel. Yet even in pain, these stories bear witness to the resilience of faith and the enduring hope of unity.

In her 1989 address to the United States Bishops, [Sr. Thea Bowman](#) offered a moving and prophetic reflection on what it means to be both Black and Catholic—Black Catholics do not approach the Church as outsiders seeking acceptance, but as faithful witnesses offering gifts formed through struggle, resilience, culture, and deep trust in God. Her words remind us that to honor Black history is to honor the lived faith, spiritual wisdom, and enduring hope that have sustained the people of God across generations—often in the midst of suffering and exclusion. Let us be faithful stewards of memory. Let us be courageous witnesses to truth. And above all, let us pray without ceasing.



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