



United States  
Conference of  
Catholic Bishops

# NEIGHBORS

A Quarterly Newsletter from Mission America

Catholic Home Missions 2024 subcommittee members pose at the historical marker for St. Joseph's Mission School in Huntsville, AL, with parish pastor Fr. Joseph Lubrano, SDS (fourth from left), during their October 2024 meeting.



During their October 2024 meeting, bishops from the USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions had a profound encounter with the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

## Civil Rights History Informs Bishops' Efforts to Combat Racism

*By Rhina Guidos*

St. Joseph Catholic Church, a mission church in Huntsville, Alabama, was small. But Bishop Steven Raica focused on its immense historical significance when greeting visitors to his Birmingham diocese in early October 2024.

Founded in 1950 by members of the Society of the Divine Savior, or Salvatorians, as a mission church for Black Catholic communities living in Huntsville, the church played a role in the Civil Rights Movement. The Salvatorian sisters opened two rooms at the mission house in 1956 as a school to educate Black children and serve their families during segregation. But something unexpected happened.

"Before integration occurred as a legal reality, there were Caucasian/white parents who wanted their children to go to that school just because they wanted to build bonds and bridges of peace and goodwill and getting along with each other. That school still exists today," Bishop Raica explained.

And that's where he took fellow bishops from the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions in early October to learn more about civil rights,

past and present, as well as future projects aimed at integrating ethnic communities in the United States.

Today, a state historical marker tells of the Catholic venue's importance as a school where "the first integrated elementary education classes in the state of Alabama took place quietly and peacefully . . . [on] September 3, 1963." These days, the school's population reflects the general ethnic makeup of the area, which is a mix of Latino, white, and Black communities. While the school population has changed over the years, the building itself has aged and needs repairs to meet the needs of today's students.

"We want to be able to have a proper building for them. So we were able to bring the Catholic Home Missions people to see the progress that was being made at that school and to hear from the church leaders at the parish," Bishop Raica said.

Because of the violence involved, the history of racism and discrimination in the United States cannot easily be studied or understood. But any prelate who ends up in Birmingham, Alabama, must strive to do so, and Bishop Raica is no exception.

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s marked a crucial turning point in the history of the United States. Through the efforts of leaders such as Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. and Birmingham, Alabama's, own Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, in the face of fierce and often violent opposition, Black Americans secured long-denied rights to vote and to participate as equals in civic and commercial life.

Some of the most important episodes of this vital period of our nation's history unfolded in the streets, churches, and jails of Birmingham. This legacy is remembered today at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, a museum and educational institution dedicated to teaching new generations of Americans the story of racism, violence, and the witness of both civil rights leaders and everyday citizens in the struggle for equal rights in the past and today.

In October 2024, I and other bishops of the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions had the privilege of visiting the Institute and other significant sites from civil rights history during our meeting in the home mission Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama. In this newsletter, you will see how this encounter with civil rights history reminds us of the sacrifices made by leaders in the past and inspires us to continue working in the present to heal the wounds and sins of racism and discrimination, both in civil society and within our Church.

Your support for Catholic Home Missions helps home mission dioceses to teach and implement the vision of the bishops' 2018 pastoral letter *Open Wide Your Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*, which reminds us of our Christian call to extend God's love to all people and to build a more just society for all, regardless of race.

With gratitude for your ongoing commitment to Catholic Home Missions that enables us to support such initiatives, I remain

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chad W. Zielinski".

Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski  
Bishop of New Ulm  
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on  
Catholic Home Missions



Catholic Home Missions subcommittee members and staff gathered for Mass at the Cathedral of St. Paul in Birmingham, AL.

In June 2020, Bishop Raica, a native of Michigan, became the head of the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama, where the long struggle for Black civil rights met violent resistance. White supremacists from the Ku Klux Klan regularly terrorized Black citizens in the early 1900s, and in 1963 four Klan members killed four little girls by bombing Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, a key location in the local Civil Rights Movement. In this city, that same year, civil rights pioneer Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" while imprisoned for taking part in nonviolent protests.

But just as Birmingham once was a flashpoint in the sometimes violent struggle for Black civil rights, it now preserves and teaches the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, which doubles as a museum and research center, was a perfect place for Bishop Raica to share with his fellow bishops on the subcommittee and the four staffers who accompanied them.

"The Institute was the big highlight of the whole experience," he said. "This is a unique aspect of Birmingham because it has been so much in the forefront of civil rights."

Joining the tour were the subcommittee's then-chairman, Bishop W. Shawn McKnight of Jefferson City, Missouri, and Bishops Bohdan J. Danylo of the Ukrainian Eparchy of St. Josaphat in Parma; James Tamayo of Laredo, Texas; Anthony Taylor of Little Rock, Arkansas; and Chad Zielinski of New Ulm, Minnesota. The Institute details

Birmingham's painful past as a segregated city that fought violently to remain that way.

"They display instances of disruption that occurred in Birmingham at the time, as well as the sociological and the historical, all these pieces that contributed to what became a very tense moment in history," Bishop Raica said.

And though Black communities were the primary targets, Bishop Raica said Catholics, along with other groups of people of color, were also terrorized by the white supremacists. He said he learned of the case of Fr. James Coyle, a Catholic priest from Birmingham who was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1921 after officiating at a ceremony for a Baptist woman from the South who had converted to Catholicism to marry a Puerto Rican man.

For Bishop Raica, one of the most memorable parts of the Institute visit was starting in a dark area where the light increases as visitors experience exhibits sharing the voices and actions of those who, even amid violence, cried out for change and refused to accept injustice.

"You feel uncomfortable at the beginning, and then by the time you get through the civil rights [period], the space begins to open up and light up, and you feel like you've got space and can be free," he said. "It helps one to understand the movement from being confined, opening up with new opportunities, and then the freedom that comes with it."

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has participated in





**Left:** Staff and members of Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions listened to the history of the civil rights movement during a tour of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. **Right:** USCCB Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism's Former Director Danielle Brown.

several activities aimed at not only learning about civil rights but also addressing racism and discrimination against African Americans and other minority groups, said Danielle Brown, former director of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism.

In large metropolitan areas, bishops have established commissions on racial justice. In regions with long slaveholding histories, some dioceses have hired staffers to work specifically on racial reconciliation; others have established racial justice commissions, and the bishops have addressed the topic in a pastoral letter.

**"We ultimately are working on these issues as a Church because racism is a barrier to people entering into the family of Christ."**

"And bishops recently have started making cultural pilgrimages to areas of significance to both Black Catholic and the local diocese's history related to slaveholding," Danielle said. "Bishops have expressed a desire to go see the places where the history happened. Specifically, we took a group [of bishops from the racism committee] to Montgomery, Alabama, and Selma."

There the bishops interacted with activists, including one who witnessed the 1965 attack on marchers in Selma, Alabama, known as Bloody

Sunday. They also visited an Edmundite mission that was established by priests to serve Black communities living in deep poverty in 1937 and existed "way before the Civil Rights Movement," Danielle continued. The bishop members of the ad hoc committee also visited City of St. Jude, a Catholic parish in Montgomery, Alabama, where Selma marchers in 1965 camped during the last leg of their trip to Montgomery to demand voting rights. The visit of the ad hoc committee also included a stop at King's church, Memorial Baptist, as well as the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton lived.

"Merton was fairly engaged with civil rights and was a huge proponent of seeing the beloved in others, as a brother or sister," Danielle said. "He was incredibly lucid at a time when it wasn't popular to be lucid on racial issues."

The group also visited the Kentucky graves of Fr. Augustus Tolton's grandmother as well as her enslaver. There, the bishops were able to speak with a descendant of the enslaver. Tolton was the first Black Catholic priest in the United States.

"[These encounters] are really robust things," Danielle said. "Bishops love being able to touch and see history and to learn more about the plight of people of color, specifically. A lot of our work has been focused on African American experiences because it's one experience within the United States that is extreme and pervasive across so many years, in a very overt way through slavery."

The ad hoc committee's work also touches on recent events, such as the 2020 homicide of George Floyd, killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after a store clerk called authorities suspecting him of using a \$20 counterfeit bill.

Bishops also are learning about Native Americans and other people of color who face discrimination. Their work helps many of them make sure that Catholic educational institutions are teaching their pupils the fullness of what the Catholic faith says on such matters.

The work of the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism has paid off, as it has given rise to other racial justice commissions that didn't previously exist.

"There are dozens and dozens, probably well over 50 resources on the website that folks can download and explore," Danielle said. "We have resources for K-12. We have adult resources. We have a list of top 10 things that you can do at the parish level. We have a Holy Hour Against Racism that people can pray."

In 2018 the bishops issued a pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*, with a study guide to provide a theological framework and "help people dig a little bit deeper than just what we think is going on the surface as it relates to race," Danielle said. In the letter, the bishops also explain why confronting racism and other forms of discrimination is important to the Catholic Church.

"We oppose evil because that's what we're called to do. That's what Christ would do, and that's what Christ does still," Danielle said. "He is the definition of love, and to be his body on the earth means to oppose evil. However, we don't do that just to be doing that, just because it's a good thing. We ultimately are working on these issues as a Church because racism is a barrier to people entering into the family of Christ." ☦



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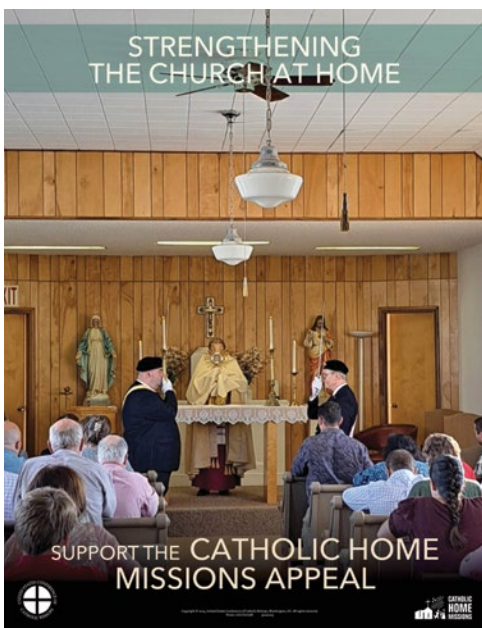
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[www.usccb.org/home-missions](http://www.usccb.org/home-missions)

### Did you know?

- The USCCB approved and issued the pastoral letter *Open Wide Your Hearts: A Pastoral Letter Against Racism* in November 2018. It is available online in English at [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf) and Spanish at [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts-spanish.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts-spanish.pdf).
- Information about racism and related church topics is available on the web page of the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism at [www.usccb.org/committees/ad-hoc-committee-against-racism](http://www.usccb.org/committees/ad-hoc-committee-against-racism).
- The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution, is dedicated to preserving and teaching the history of Birmingham's role in the Civil Rights Movement. To learn more, please visit the Institute's website: [www.bcri.org](http://www.bcri.org).

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in US dioceses. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | PO Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal. iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts contributions to support the Catholic Home Missions program: [usccb.igivecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions](http://usccb.igivecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions).

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