

Leading the FLOCK

BY BISHOP DANIEL E. THOMAS



'Racism'

Racism. The very word causes us to bristle. Racism. The very word may make us uncomfortable. And well it should. Racism, by its first dictionary definition, is the "belief that each race has certain qualities or abilities giving rise to the view that some races are better than others." Its second definition is simpler still: "Discrimination against or hostility toward other races."

When someone is accused of being a racist, it means that person is discriminatory, prejudiced, bigoted against other persons, because of race or ethnic origin. We who call ourselves Catholics and profess to be followers of Jesus Christ, are called to the opposite: to respect for each human person as made in the image and likeness of God, no matter the race or ethnic origin.

Recent events have highlighted anew that the evil of racism is far from being eradicated. In fact, it seems we're becoming more and more polarized as a society. High School boys from Covington Catholic attending the March for Life were vilified, even by bishops, in a social media frenzied flash mob that went viral because of a video first thought to unmask their racist behavior. Only later would the opposite become evident. At a local transmissions plant, allegations of racial intimidation including nooses and discriminatory slurs have received national attention and appear not yet fully addressed. And more recently, the Governor of Virginia's admission and then denial regarding a racist yearbook photo of individuals in blackface and a Ku Klux Klan costume, have garnered the national spotlight.

For the follower of Christ, racism in all its forms is unacceptable. It may be that many folks in the past, including some of our older relatives, spoke about persons of different

racism or ethnic origin using racial slurs or inappropriate derogatory nicknames. While their cultural/societal upbringing may have formed them in such habits, and while many of them may not have intended their language as hateful or racist, it does not negate the fact that objectively, their remarks or language were, in fact, bigoted.

Jesus Christ transcends culture and race. How often have we seen sacred art, for example Nativity Sets from around the world, portray all the persons in the scene in the cultural setting of that nation, including their race. While we all know that historically Jesus was a Jew, everyone recognizes that when he is depicted artistically, it is perfectly understandable that he appears as Chinese for the Chinese, as Black for Africans, as Hispanic for Mexicans, and so on. Jesus Christ transcends culture and race!

For eight of the years I worked at the Vatican in the Congregation for Bishops, I had the privilege of serving under Cardinal Bernardin Gantin as Prefect, a Black African from Benin. He was one of the finest human beings, priests, bishops or Cardinals I have ever met! Once, when examining a list of three candidates for presentation to the Holy Father for nomination as the next bishop of a particular diocese, a majority of my fellow workers were convinced that it had to be a certain candidate, based principally on his race. After all the staff had expressed their opinions, the Cardinal disagreed and said: "The Church must be colorblind!" In fact, the Holy Father in the end did not choose the candidate so many had thought best. I have never forgotten those words of Cardinal Gantin!

With the ugliness of the sin of racism daily before us, and in this Black History Month, it is good for us to pause to do a personal

examination of conscience, no matter our race or ethnic origin. I invite you this month to examine your language, your humor, your cultural conditioning, your attitudes toward those of other races and ethnic origins. Is there any evidence, any residue, any trace of prejudice, bigotry or racial intolerance? And if there is, take the appropriate action to root it out, to excise it from your daily life, perhaps with the help of family members, co-workers, classmates or trusted friends. For further reflection and to address the issue forthrightly both at home in our families, in our parishes, in our schools and in our work places, I recommend you read, study and discuss the recently published document from the USCCB - "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love," a Pastoral Letter against racism.

In the environment in which we live, it is ever more important to recognize and exercise the respect and dignity due to every person, no matter whether they are born or unborn, no matter whether they are healthy or physically or mentally disabled, no matter their race or ethnic origin. Why? Because Jesus Christ transcends culture and ethnic origin.

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February 9, 2019