

Catholics And the Rise of Barack Obama

Why Race Still Matters

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The election of the first African-American president undoubtedly represents a milestone along the road to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "beloved community." Yet we must not be tempted to think that racism and discrimination no longer preclude many people from full participation in American Society.

Some pundits are hastily proclaiming that President Barack Obama's victory proves that we are a "post-racial" nation, one in which race no longer matters. The election results are encouraging. More whites, including more young white voters and more poor white voters, voted for Barack Obama in 2008 than voted for John Kerry in 2004. But John McCain, the G.O.P. nominee, garnered 55 percent of the vote among all whites, and some whites openly declared they would not vote for a black candidate. The election of the first black president, although a cause for joy, did not dismantle racism in one fell swoop. Even if the scope of the problem has diminished, no one should deny that our nation has yet to confront fully its legacy of racism.

The Catholic Response

Catholics are not immune from the need to address racism in the United States. Barack Obama's thoughtful, carefully nuanced speech delivered in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, should have sparked long-overdue discussions on race in Roman Catholic parishes, schools, institutions and families across America. Yet this did not happen widely, and most parishes still do not recognize racism for the threat that it is to the unity of the people of God. Instead of a meaningful conversation about race among Catholics in the final months of the campaign, disheartening reports were published in the media about Catholics who would not vote for any black presidential candidate. To be clear, Catholics of good conscience could certainly find legitimate reasons not to vote for Obama. As Bishop Blasé Cupich prophetically declared in these pages, however, "to allow racism to reign in our hearts and to determine our choice in this solemn moment for our nation is to cooperate with one of the great evils that has afflicted our society" [Am., 10/27/08].

In recent decades the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, organizations like Catholic Charities USA and contemporary Roman Catholic theologians have produced important works on racism. Barack Obama's assessment of race and American life and his proposals to remedy its problems strikingly resemble those of the bishops and other Catholic thinkers. Given this convergence, Catholics should heed President Obama's call to overcome our nation's past and its persistent racism and discrimination.

The Evil of Racism: The Status Quo

Barack Obama's description of the state of affairs in the United States echoes what the U.S. Bishops stated in their pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us* [1979] and reiterated in a research report on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of that letter. In a research report on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of that letter. President Obama recognizes that much progress has been made over the last several decades. He believes that the uniqueness and greatness of the United States has allowed Americans of African descent like himself to succeed. Yet he maintains that injustices against African-Americans and other minorities endure and that much of that work remains to be done to make the American dream possible for all Americans. In Obama's view, the education achievement gap between black and white students stems from the inferior schools that many African Americans were and still are forced to attend. The wealth and income gap between blacks and whites can be attributed to the numerous forms of discrimination that blacks historically experienced, like lack of access to loans and mortgages for African-American business owners and families and systematic exclusion from employment and unions.

Today, many African-Americans lack economic opportunities, which place a strain on their families and communities. Many black communities are without basic services and amenities like parks and police protection that most middle-class Americans take for granted.

Many black communities are without basic services and amenities like parks and police protection that most middle-class Americans take for granted. Obama also contends that the racially charged events in Jena, La., in 2008 revealed “glaring inequalities in our justice system,” including unfairly harsh penalties for first-time nonviolent offenders. Obama implied in a speech at Howard University in 2007 that these unjust sentences are disproportionately meted out to minorities. He also decried racial profiling and the attempt by the Justice Department under George W. Bush to eliminate affirmative action programs at American institutions of higher learning. Mr. Obama concluded that “profound institutional barriers” preclude many Americans from among all races from having equal access to good schools, productive jobs, and health care.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops’ assessment is similar. In 1979 the bishops wrote that racism is an evil that “endures in our society and in our church.” They called for a number of measures to be taken within the church and more broadly in American society to combat racism. They urged all Catholics, for example, to reflect on their personal racial biases and to do everything in their power to eliminate this “radical evil” that generates unjust and oppressive social structures.

Unfortunately, the bishops’ own update and report in 2004 revealed that racism is still not being discussed in the church. Only 36 percent of Roman Catholics in the United States reported that they heard a homily that addressed racism, and only 18 percent of bishops have issued statements in their dioceses concerning racism. The report also found white Catholics more opposed to public policies designed to attenuate racial inequality than they were in the past. The report expressed concern that while blacks were increasingly represented in leadership positions within the church, more effort had to be made to boost minority representation among staff at all levels of church ministries. This remains a particularly urgent task, given that many of the church’s social ministries serve groups made up predominately of minorities.

In pastoral letters and statements, some individual bishops have unequivocally condemned the sin of racism. In 1998, for example, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia published a pastoral letter, *Healing Racism through Faith and Truth*, in which he referred to racism as an “intrinsic evil” that impedes one’s ability to love God, since one cannot love God if one does not love all of God’s children. The cardinal leveled a stinging critique: “Our American history from its inception, tragically, has been influenced by the historical circumstance that an exception was made. The flawed concept that ‘all men except’ was adopted in practice. Some among us were not to be considered equal. A distinction based on race was set in motion in American life. This distinction in many and varied guises has remained a sin deeply rooted in American life”

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago has described the entrenched forms of racism that characterize contemporary American life. In his 2001 pastoral letter *Dwell in My Love*, he addresses primarily four types. *Spatial racism* is the creation of “patterns of metropolitan development” by whites through which they cordon themselves off in affluent suburbs or gentrified urban areas far removed from blighted neighborhoods where mostly poor African-American and other minorities reside. *Institutional racism* manifests itself in institutions created by whites; it privileges a white Anglo-American cultural and racial perspective and “ignores the contributions of other peoples and cultures.”

Like Barack Obama, Cardinal George and his brother bishops are concerned that minorities “are often treated more harshly than other citizens in their encounters with the criminal justice system.” The dearth of minority leaders and the devaluation of their cultures in American institutions often give rise to the third type of contemporary racism, according to George: *internalized racism*. This occurs when members of minority groups adopt the negative stereotypes about themselves that have been perpetuated by the majority. Finally, *individual racism* is a conscious, personal bias that infects the hearts of people who perpetuate racist attitudes through racial slurs, hate crimes and other more subtle means.

Barack Obama’s words and the bishops’ teaching on the persistence of racism in the United States largely mirror one another, and their analyses are confirmed by statistics. Catholic Charities USA recently released a study titled *Poverty and Racism: Overlapping Threats to the Common Good*, which contends that Hurricane Katrina unveiled the too-frequently disguised poor in the United States, who remain largely unnoticed as a result of racism.

Redlining, in which the Federal Housing Administration engaged during the 1940's and 1950's, granted 98 percent of mortgage loans to whites, denying blacks one of the primary means of generating wealth in this country.

These and other racial injustices led to the "state-sanctioned unjust impoverishment" of blacks and other minorities, which continues. Today 33 percent of African-American children live in poverty, 28 percent of Latino children and 27 percent of Native American children; by contrast, 10 percent of white children live in poverty. The most extreme poverty afflicts geographic areas populated mainly by minorities. White families possess on average 10 times more wealth than do families of color. This "wealth gap" has grown since 1998, with white families enjoying a 20 percent boost in their net worth, while African-American families have seen their wealth decrease. This stems in part from inequalities in the workplace, where white males occupy more than 90 percent of executive corporate positions. As the Catholic ethicist Barbara Hilker Andolsen has noted, unemployment rates rose among blacks during the economic recovery from 2001–2005—some of the rise attributable to overt racism. Studies show that job candidates with "names that sounded black, such as Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones" are 50 percent less likely to be given a job interview than are white candidates with similar credentials.

Dismantling Racism, Building the Kingdom

Although President Obama has lamented the failure of Americans to eradicate many of the injustices of African-Americans still face in the United States, he distanced himself from his pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, with what is called in Christian theology a "strong" doctrine of grace. In his speech in Philadelphia, Obama maintained that Rev. Wright had erred in claiming that racism is endemic to the United States in the sense that the incorrigibility of white oppressors will continue to breed racial oppression because they and the system they dominate cannot change. In theological terms, this is tantamount to stating that God's grace cannot overcome the propensity of white oppressors to keep their black brothers and sisters down.

In Obama's view, however, some of the shackles of prejudice have already been broken. Theologically, he appears to see God's grace already at work in the conversion of many whites and in the gradual improvement of society. Obama maintains the hope that racism will eventually be purged from America. Anyone who reads his speeches or books, however, understands that Obama knows this will be an arduous task. The president has proposed measures to move us toward this goal. Among them are more vigorous enforcement of civil rights by the Department of Justice, rectifying inequities caused by pay discrimination, ensuring that children of minorities and the poor have good educational opportunities, the elimination of racial disparities in the judicial system and fair access to credit for minorities.

Obama's hopeful stance on racism resembles the best thinking in Catholic theology on powerful presence of sin in the world and the ability of God's grace to overcome it through the action of the Holy Spirit, working in and through God's children. This teaching is beautifully expressed in the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" [*Gaudium et Spes*]. Here the bishops of the Second Vatican Council describe human activity infected by sin but "purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and Resurrection." They contend that creating a more just and peaceful society contributes to the building of the kingdom of God. In other words, with the aid of God's grace, "we shall overcome."

The U.S. bishops also translate this Catholic optimism into specific policies, resembling those of Obama. Cardinal George, for example, urged fair access to decent housing and credit minorities, good schools, "equal pay and employment for women and minorities," an equitable justice system and "voting for public officials committed to racial and systemic justice." And Archbishop Harry Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis argued in 2003 that we can and must address the many "root cause" of racism and promote the economic and social rights of the poor, thereby enabling minorities to participate fully in society. Succinctly stated, both Obama and the bishops believe in the power of humans to be instruments of change, aided by God's grace. Would that all Americans recognize the work that still needs to be done and affirm our ability to do it.