



# open wide our hearts

the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

## What is Systemic Racism?

Today, racism continues to exist in our communities and in our parishes. Racism is what makes us see the "other" with suspicion or to attribute negative characteristics to an entire group of people. This evil manifests itself in our *individual thoughts*, and also in the *workings of our society itself*. Today's continuing inequalities in education, housing, employment, wealth, and representation in leadership positions are rooted in our country's shameful history of slavery and systemic racism.



### Systemic Racism

Discrimination based on race and ethnicity takes many forms. The United States has made progress in eliminating some of the institutional, legalized racial discrimination of years past such as slavery, Jim Crow laws, "separate but equal" schools, and prohibitions on voting or owning land.

These hard-fought victories deserve to be remembered and celebrated.

Still, these advances are incomplete. Data on social and economic welfare show disparities between many persons of color and their white counterparts.

- Unemployment rates for African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are considerably higher than the national average. Growing income inequality increasingly affects minorities.
- In the United States, median wealth for white households is ten times greater than for black households, and eight times greater than for Hispanic households.
- Minority homeownership rates lag behind their white counterparts, and yet research shows that minorities face extra hurdles in getting approved for mortgages.
- African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are disproportionately affected through every stage of the criminal justice system, despite the evidence that different racial and ethnic groups commit crimes at roughly the same rates.

## Racism's Impact in our Communities

America remains a deeply divided place in many ways. Many Americans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds live in neighborhoods that are homogenous. This often limits the opportunity to learn from, interact with, and befriend people who are racially and ethnically different. Yet, having experiences living near those with different experiences and backgrounds can strengthen communities and the Body of Christ.

Many people of color living in low-income areas experience low or no upward economic mobility due to limited access to quality schools, safe neighborhoods, reliable transportation, or higher-paying jobs. Laws and practices in more affluent communities, such as refusing rent assistance vouchers, can prevent low income persons from moving into these communities. As a result, dialogue and encounter with others with diverse backgrounds, experiences, and opinions can be limited or non-existent. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (no. 59), Pope Francis noted that exclusion and inequality create the climate for discord. Recent violence in communities across the country and the hurtful rhetoric that mark conversations about refugees and migrants indicate that there is still much work to do.

**As Christians, we are constantly called to examine our own hearts and consciences for how we might**

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*“Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality—economic and social—that we still see all around us. With renewed vigor, we call on members of the Body of Christ to join others in advocating and promoting policies at all levels that will combat racism and its effects in our civic and social institutions.”*

– U.S. bishops, *Open Wide Our Hearts*

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**contribute to or break down racial divisions, intolerance, and discrimination.** The failure to act to end systemic racism hurts those who are victimized and denies all of us the opportunity to benefit from the gifts of diversity.

*This handout is excerpted from the *Creating on the Margins* Contest Packet. Visit [usccb.org/youthcontest](http://usccb.org/youthcontest) or [usccb.org/concurso-juvenil](http://usccb.org/concurso-juvenil) to learn more about *Creating on the Margins*, a contest for youth in grades 7-12 that educates youth about poverty in the U.S. and our Catholic response. The 2018-2019 theme is “A Time to Heal Racism.” The contest is sponsored by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development.*

