

CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Eliminate Racial and Religious Discrimination: See Every Person as My Sister or Brother

Pastoral Message by the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs And the Episcopal Commission for Interfaith Dialogue

March 21, 2004

We love because God first loves us...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.¹

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

1. The 21st day of March 2004 is the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. This International Day was established in order to acknowledge that racism exists, and to deepen our understanding of how racial and religious discrimination militates against the fullness of life for all our sisters and brothers. We as Catholic bishops also wish to take advantage of this opportunity to recognize how deeply our communities are enriched by different religious and cultural practices and to promote harmony, respect and acceptance among all.
2. People have come to Canada from all over the globe, bringing with them their talents, hopes, dreams and aspirations. To them we say: "Welcome! Our lives and our history are blessed by your presence, and our common future dawns brighter with the promise of even fuller interaction among us." Scripture tells us that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, and is thus deserving of profound respect and dignity.²
3. As Canadian bishops we reject all forms of racism and all discrimination on the basis of race or religion. From police and media reports and from our friends in the Aboriginal, black, Jewish, Muslim and other communities we have been made aware of incidents of racism, racial profiling and discrimination of various kinds. Some of these situations have occurred as a result of new tensions arising from "the war on terrorism."³ Other situations are not new, but may arise from entrenched inequalities from Canada's past.
4. Racism is not new to Canada. The experience of Blacks and Asians (among others) who arrived here generations ago clearly demonstrates this sad fact. There were and continue to be elements of racism in the damaged relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in our country. We have recognized, for example, the role that Church organizations have played in the operation of the former Indian Residential Schools and that, though many served with great devotion "...the system was dangerously flawed by the policy underlying it."⁴ For members of the Church and for other Canadians to be able to confront racial and religious discrimination today, an authentic knowledge of the failings as well as the healing efforts of our past history is required.
5. Catholics believe that entertaining attitudes or acting in a manner that reflects racial or religious discrimination is a sin against the specific message of Christ for whom one's neighbor is every

person.⁵ Systemic racism is also a social sin,⁶ thus demanding a societal response that can assume institutional or legislative forms. Similarly, religious discrimination is an offence against the dignity of the human person; a contradiction to the sincere respect which is owed to other faiths, and an offence against charity.⁷ We have listened attentively to the concerns of our sisters and brothers who have experienced racial or religious discrimination and take this opportunity to say, “We hear you! With you, we will work for change.”

6. Thus, there are several responsibilities for Catholic communities to assume in order to address racism and racial as well as religious discrimination in our country.

The Role of the Catholic Community in Eliminating Racial and Religious Discrimination

7. **In the Church:** As the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reminded us in its document before the 2001 World Conference Against Racism (in Durban, South Africa), the Church wants first and foremost to change racist attitudes, including those within Christian communities. The Church appeals first of all to the moral and religious sense of people, asking God to change hearts. The Church offers a place for reconciliation, and promotes initiatives of welcome, exchange, and mutual assistance for men and women belonging to other ethnic and religious groups. Despite the sinful limitations of its members in every age, the Church is to be a sign and instrument of the unity of humankind. The message the Church proposes to everyone, and which Catholics have to live is “Every person is my brother or sister.”⁸
8. In this spirit, leaders within the Catholic Church have apologized for individual and collective actions that contributed to the injustice that Aboriginal people continue to bear.⁹ Much of the activity of our Conference of Bishops (often in tandem with our ecumenical colleagues) is currently directed towards speaking out on issues of Aboriginal justice¹⁰ and developing Aboriginal catechesis and formation programs that respect their profound spiritual, moral and cultural heritage.¹¹ The work of the Catholic Aboriginal Council, including the Fund for Reconciliation, Solidarity and Communion, is taking leadership in these important efforts. Today this Council is an active and visible expression of our partnership in the task of building the Reign of God.
9. Interfaith dialogue and respectful contact with people of other religions are privileged ways for Catholics to promote more just relationships.¹² This was emphasized at a meeting of eight world religions organized in 2003 by the Pontifical Council for interreligious encounters which have helped many to come together to learn about each other’s religious beliefs and shared values, and to discover the possibility of living and working together to build societies of justice and peace.”¹³ Not only does our Bishops’ Conference continue to place a high priority on such encounters, but in recent months we have been pleased to participate in interreligious prayer services for peace that have been organized in many of our communities.
10. **In our communities:** We need to develop sensitivities enabling us to recognize racism and religious discrimination wherever these may occur, for example in the provision of social services or lodging. Through social involvement in our communities, such as the Multi-faith Housing Initiative or other social justice efforts like the World Council for Religion and Peace, we can make a positive difference, along with other people of good will. Basing our actions on the call to respect the dignity of each person, created in the image and likeness of God, we can defend the human rights of all persons.
11. **In our schools:** Catholic educational institutions also have a particular and crucial role to play in raising awareness of the situation, as well as to promote actions for societal and legislative

change. We commend both school boards that have initiated anti-racism policies and those principals who have creatively endeavored to have them implemented.¹⁴ The Durban Conference appealed for special attention to the education of children and youth towards the values of solidarity, respect and appreciation of diversity.¹⁵ Pope John Paul II referred to this when he said, “Often, solidarity does not come easily. It requires training and a turning away from attitudes of closure, which in many societies today have become more subtle and penetrating. To deal with this phenomenon, the Church possesses vast educational and formative resources at all levels. I therefore appeal to parents and teachers to combat racism and xenophobia by inculcating positive attitudes based on Catholic social doctrine.”¹⁶ Here, we issue a special invitation to youth, as a result of the vibrant energy we all witnessed during World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto: live out Gospel values enthusiastically! Create “a civilization of love!”¹⁷

12. **In the media:** Rapid technological change has certainly enhanced the power of the mass media to “transmit implicit value-systems: today.”¹⁸ Especially meaningful to Canadian youth are the images, music, products and even lifestyles promoted by the media. Public authorities have the responsibility to ensure that racist messages and discriminatory stereotypes are not propagated. At the same time, new challenges are presented by the increased use of the Internet and the particular difficulty of proscribing the huge range of information available there. Nonetheless, work with media outlets to dispel racist and discriminatory messages, and to give voice to under-represented communities is crucial. We invite the Catholic media to be increasingly proactive by transmitting the viewpoints of visible minorities, thus enhancing knowledge of and familiarity with their concerns.
13. **In the policies of our governments:** In Canada today, governments should renew their efforts to defend and welcome refugees and migrants. Church communities can then enhance settlement activities.¹⁹ Under the new Citizenship and Immigration law, it should not become more difficult for migrants to be accepted into our country. Refugees applying from U.S. ports of entry should not be prohibited from entering Canada due to the new Safe Third Country agreement.²⁰ Even more dramatic realities are encountered in the squalid situations which millions of persons, our sisters and brothers, are forced to endure in refugee camps throughout the world. Increased Canadian financial assistance needs to be directed to the United Nations High Commissions for Refugees and non-governmental groups such as the International Catholic Migration Commission.
14. **In the search for peace:** “Racism is a challenge to peace. Peace can only be constructed in a climate of mutual respect and understanding.”²¹ Thus the call to each of us to work for peace (Matthew 5:9) should find greater echo in our attitudes and actions to promote harmony, respect, acceptance and justice. As Pope John Paul II said in his 2003 Message for the World Day of Peace, “Gestures of peace spring from the lives of people who foster peace first of all in their own hearts.”²² Praying and acting for peace throughout this troubled world is the vocation of every individual Christian, every family and every community. Efforts to end racial prejudice and religious discrimination are urgently required for peace to grow in our hearts, in our Church, in our communities, and in our world. By the grace of Christ, may we all come to more deeply understand and love every person as our sister or our brother.

March 21, 2004

¹ 1 John 4,19-21

² Genesis 1,26

- ³ Ron Csillagl, "Canadian conference probes 'new' anti-Semitism," *Prairie Messenger*, February 26, 2003, p. 6; Michael Swan, "Newsroom culture defames Islam," *The Catholic Register*, March 2, 2003, p. 5; Paul Koring, "National Country of origin key to new U.S. visa plan: Fingerprints, photographs to be required of certain Canadian landed immigrants," *globe and Mail*, May 22, 2003, p. A4; Richard Cl  roux, "Policing Ottawa's Bigots," *Ottawa City Magazine*, February/March 2002
- ⁴ Brief by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "Let justice flow like a mighty river," 1995. See: <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/english/consultations/racial-profiling-terms.html>.
- ⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society," November 1988, #24
- ⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1869.
- ⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2104.
- ⁸ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society," November 1988, #33. Quoted in "Contribution of the Holy See to the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Durban, South Africa, August-September, 2001."
- ⁹ See Oblate Conference of Canada, "An Apology to the First Nations of Canada," July 24, 1991; Bishops' Advisory Committee, "Pastoral Letter on Native Issues in Manitoba," January 20, 1993; Father Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Jesuits, "Apology to Native Americans for Past Mistakes," Idaho, May 16, 1993.
- ¹⁰ See www.cccb.ca, especially "Ecumenical Statement of Church Leaders on Aboriginal Rights," March 19, 2003.
- ¹¹ See CCCB Episcopal Commission for the Evangelization of Peoples, "Rediscovering, Recognizing and Celebrating the Spiritual Heritage of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples", May 1999.
- ¹² The CCCB supports and has representation on the Ecumenical Committee on Racism, the National Muslim/Christian Liaison Committee and the Canadian Jewish/Christian Consultation (CCJC). It encourages local initiatives, especially those which bring together Jewish/Christian/Muslim participants in dialogue.
- ¹³ Final Declaration, "Spiritual Resources of the Religions for Peace," Rome, January 16-18, 2003.
- ¹⁴ See for example the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board's Policy on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity, www.ocdsb.on.ca. For examples of Multicultural education see: http://www.scarboromissions.ca/Mission_education/celebrating_multiculturalism.php#teachers.
- ¹⁵ Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, "Racism: Educating Future Generations to a Different Vision of Human Relations," (March 25 speech to U.N. Commission on Human Rights) *Origins*, April 17, 2003, pp. 729-730.
- ¹⁶ Message of Pope John Paul II for the 89th World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2003).
- ¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, Address for the Closing of the Holy Year, December 25, 1975; Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, January 22, 1999, #10.
- ¹⁸ John Paul II, Message for World Day of Peace 2001, #11
- ¹⁹ See: "A Prophetic Mission for the Church: Pastoral Message on the Acceptance and Integration of Immigrants and Refugees to Build a Community of Togetherness," CCCB Episcopal Commission for Theology, March 1993.
- ²⁰ Letter of Bishop Jean Gagnon, Chairman of the CCCB Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs, to the Honorable Denis Coderre, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, March 7, 2003.
- ²¹ Archbishop Diarmuid Martin to the 59th session of the Commission on Human Rights of the United Nations, March 25, 2003, *l'Osservatore Romano*, #14, 2 April, 2003, p. 6.
- ²² Message for the World Day of Peace, 2003.