

READING, PRAYING, LIVING
THE US BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER
AGAINST RACISM
OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS

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Against Racism
Open Wide Our Hearts

A Faith Formation Guide

Alison M. Benders



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For my husband, Larry, and our children

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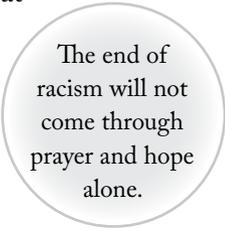
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Introduction

“If we wish to serve God and love our neighbor well, we must manifest our joy in the service we render to Him and to them. Let us open wide our hearts” (16).¹ So insisted St. Katharine Drexel, the first saint born in the United States. Mother Drexel founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament and committed herself to serving Native American and African American communities during her long life, spanning the end of slavery to the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ recent pastoral letter against racism invites her protection by its title, *Open Wide Our Hearts*. The letter’s essential theme is love. It describes a humble and expansive love that respects human dignity and unites us all into a community in Christ. The bishops teach us that racism denies full human dignity to some people in our society.

We see racism at work in the superiority that some people feel over others and, even more so, in the structures and habits of our communities that privilege some and disinherit others. Racism has inflicted untold violence, strife, oppression, and alienation in our nation for centuries. “Racism directly places brother and sister against each other, violating the dignity inherent in each person,” the bishops write (25). They call us to



The end of racism will not come through prayer and hope alone.

model our lives on Christ's love, which unites all people into one human family. The letter is a renewed, deeper, and more urgent call to conversion. The bishops invite us to eradicate racism in all its forms through hearts that are wide open in active love. We can respond with converted minds to understand what racism is, with converted hearts to recognize its destructiveness for individuals and society, and with converted actions that purposefully aim to create a just community in our nation and our church.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published *Open Wide Our Hearts* in late 2018.² Released nearly forty years after their prior pastoral statement on racism,³ this letter seeks to reignite our passion for racial justice in order to eradicate America's "original sin" (4). The bishops sketch out both past and present sins. They recognize that the church's response to racism largely has been silence, a silence that is inconsistent with the principles of Catholic social thought and with our faith. The bishops ask for forgiveness for their own racial sins and pledge themselves to the struggle to heal the racial divide. Most importantly, they have opened the door for the rest of us to reflect seriously on racism and to commit ourselves to building a more just community. As Catholics, we profess to believe that Christ's love unites all people into one body. This letter calls us to both conversion and action to root out racism. The bishops close with this most urgent message: "We pray that the reader will join us in striving for the end of racism in all its forms, that we may walk together humbly with God and with all of our brothers and sisters in a renewed unity" (26).

The end of racism will not come through prayer and hope alone. A conversion of our national culture, as the letter instructs us, will occur only through our intentional efforts to reform the cultural, political, legal, and structural impediments to every person's full participation in society. We must be seriously committed to a shared future, in which the color of people's skin

or their family ancestry truly does not matter. The unacknowledged difficulty is the real and painful challenge of reconciling people after centuries of such profound divisions and violence. The legacy of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation continue in our legal system and practices. They perpetuate past legacies of oppression and exclusion. Healing our racial wounds, for some, will mean reliving personal traumas, threats to life and safety, and daily injustices. For others, it will mean guilt, embarrassment, indignation, and coping with unearned advantages.

For all of us, healing racial injustice must mean humbly embracing our common history, the times when we have repeatedly valued one group over another simply because of inherited differences and imposed social stigmas. Our nation has focused harmfully on difference rather than on the unity of humanity that reflects God's infinite love in the varieties of our gifts and perspectives. While we must certainly speak of cultural and systemic racism, racial justice is always a call to personal conversion that yields social and structural transformation. Racial justice requires us to reflect on how we have suffered as a fragmented and divided nation and how we, as a united people, can forge a culture for our nation that is no longer premised on exploitation and marginalization. If racism can be uprooted, our tools must be the Spirit's gifts of humility, love, and courage.



Racial justice is always a call to personal conversion.

This study guide, then, aims to help parishes and faith groups unpack *Open Wide Our Hearts*. We will start with an overview of Catholic social thought and the prominent themes in the social encyclicals of the church. After that, we will learn why the bishops' letter is so timely and how it came to be published after a careful process of study and writing. Finally, we will highlight several themes to guide our study of *Open Wide Our Hearts*, section by section, in the later chapters of this guide.

What Is Catholic Social Teaching?

Open Wide Our Hearts, directed to Catholics in the United States, expresses the church's teachings on how we can together build a more racially just society. The letter is modeled on the style of papal encyclicals, which are official Roman Catholic church teachings that popes address to all Catholics and often to all people of good will throughout the world. Generally, encyclicals instruct readers on Catholic perspectives about social issues or on matters of doctrine or liturgical practice. Popes sign encyclicals in their own names to show that the letters are their own instructions to the clergy and laity of the church.

The social encyclicals, collectively known as Catholic social teaching or Catholic social thought, are the church's major writings about our lives together in society. Their topics include labor, family and marriage, economic justice, and the life of faith.⁴ Pope Francis has authored two encyclicals: Praise Be to You—On Care For Our Common Home (*Laudato Si*, May 24, 2015), which addresses the global ecological crisis; and The Light of Faith (*Lumen Fidei*, June 29, 2013), which explains the Catholic faith in the current global culture and reiterates our principal beliefs. Pope Francis's writings have been praised for their pastoral tone. He uses metaphors to convey vividly how we are to think about our Christian lives. Famously, he painted the church in the image of a "field hospital" located in the heart of our suffering world, working to heal people's lives and relationships. The pope's major themes have been mercy and the integral or intertwined nature of all life and all human communities.



We can find inspiration to live with each other in more just and loving ways.

Although encyclicals are anchored in pressing social or economic concerns, the letters put specific issues into the broader context of a flourishing human community in which

our lives enfold God's love for all people. Encyclicals explore issues through a combination of scriptural background, theological interpretation, and moral formation. They may offer deep historical-critical analysis by relying on expert studies of the issues as the foundation for the formation in the letters. The teachings customarily offer a specific scriptural and theological lens so that readers can understand how to reflect on their concerns and how to form their consciences to live the Gospel more fully.

The social encyclicals are not catechism, because their purpose is not to define what Catholics must believe. They do not suggest public policies to be enacted as laws. Rather, social encyclicals, such as the widely acclaimed *Laudato Si*, aim for moral-religious-personal transformation rather than programs and remedies. Social encyclicals connect society's current issues with Scripture's stories and parables to inspire our imaginative reflection. They invite us to live our love for God more intentionally within our local communities and in relationship with all people. Through a new vision of what ought to be, especially lessons from Jesus' life and ministry, we find inspiration to live with each other in more just and loving ways.⁵ *Open Wide Our Hearts* sits squarely within this social encyclical tradition.

What Is Open Wide Our Hearts About?

Although racism is a global social issue, *Open Wide Our Hearts* is a pastoral letter from the bishops of the United States to instruct Catholics about racism in our country. The bishops seek to guide us to conversion—to change our hearts—followed by deliberate actions to create more just communities in our nation. As Catholic readers, we appreciate the gravity and urgency of racism because the bishops of the United States, as a whole, affirmed this letter. *Open Wide Our Hearts* addresses

every Catholic in every diocese in our nation. We must take the bishops' words to heart and respond.

The long-standing evil of racism, as well as current “episodes of violence and animosity with racial and xenophobic overtones” occurring in our communities, motivated the bishops to write this pastoral letter.⁶ In August 2017, the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops started the process by appointing the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, now led by Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of the Houma-Thibodaux diocese in Louisiana. The USCCB charged the ad hoc committee to unite Catholics together as a church and as members of society to find ways to heal racism through the pastoral guidance they can offer. Aiming for a tone of pastoral care, they wanted a letter that inspired reflection, contrition, and conversion. They recognized that when people change their hearts, the new commitment “then multiplies, [and] will compel change and reform in our institutions and society.”⁷ The letter continues the teaching in *Brothers and Sisters to Us: A Pastoral Letter on Racism* from 1979. However, as culture and social conditions in the United States have changed in four decades, *Open Wide Our Hearts* offers a more nuanced and more insistent call for a love that will nurture a community of healing and justice.

To inspire a vision of such a community in Christ, the new letter incorporates both Scripture and the principles of Catholic social teaching going back more than one hundred years. The letter provides a structure for understanding racism as a sin and calls us to convert our hearts and minds. Many of the themes are familiar to us:

- All human beings are created in the image of God.
- Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated God's reign of justice.

- We are one community united in Christ—the Body of Christ—and governed by love, justice, and human dignity.
- Care for the poor and marginalized is a special mark of the Christian community.

Building on these principles, *Open Wide Our Hearts* emphasizes that racism is a profound failure to love—a failure to recognize the image of God in each and every person. We read again and again in this letter the theme of conversion, which is essential for a more just community.

More specifically, *Open Wide Our Hearts* builds upon the bishops' letter of 1979, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. This second letter updates events in the forty-year interval and reflects the US church's deepening awareness of the complexity of racial privilege and oppression. For one thing, the letter identifies racism as more than bigotry and intolerance. Through the course of the letter, the bishops touch on five important topics:

1. historical violence specifically mentioning Native Americans, African Americans, and those of Hispanic descent;
2. implicit bias and racial attitudes that influence actions, even when we don't realize it;
3. legacies of past wounds, such as the legal and social structures that perpetuate oppression and marginalization;
4. cultural values and norms that rank individuals according to skin color and heritage; and
5. the church's own complicity in what it has done and failed to do about racial justice over centuries in the Americas.

The letter tries to offer a balanced perspective by highlighting saints and heroes from various racial backgrounds who have struggled for racial justice. Significantly, the bishops apologize for their individual and collective racist actions and ask for forgiveness. This contrition models conversion of heart for those of us who read the letter. In fact, the bishops' mood of contrition weaves together the main themes and draws us into the urgent call to heal the racial injustice that wounds our nation. *Open Wide Our Hearts* ends on a practical but urgent note to every Catholic believer and to all Catholic offices and organizations: We are called to open wide our hearts so that "we will not cease to speak forcefully against and work toward ending racism" (25). The responsibility rests with each of us to create a community of love that will usher in God's reign of justice. The letter closes with a prayer to Mary, the Mother of God.

Many Catholics have welcomed the letter against racism. Some think it has been too long delayed and says too little. More than a few Catholics have puzzled over why this

There is an urgent call to heal the racial injustice that wounds our nation.

topic is urgent when environmental degradation threatens all life on the planet and the clergy sexual abuse revelations undermine the very unity of our church. Still others are frustrated and dismayed with the letter because it seems to sidestep fundamental questions of white identity, white privilege, and white supremacy.

There are several things to understand about the timing of the letter and how the USCCB came to approve it. First, no social teaching stands alone. No issue affecting our human dignity and shared life can be separated from our fundamental commitment to love God and others. Rather, all issues for our human society are linked. Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* preaches about an "integral ecology," showing us how all creation is connected and all our actions are intertwined to destroy or heal the

earth. Our commitment to a clean planet and environmental health for all species will support our grandchildren's flourishing in the decades ahead. Likewise, when we live from hearts committed to dignity and respect for all human beings, we consequently become more aware of the way we treat our environment, organize our communities, and spend our money. When we treat others as our brothers and sisters because we are all created in the image of God, we become sensitive to their suffering. Their suffering becomes our concern. So this letter stands within more sustained efforts by the church in the United States, especially by individual bishops, to promote racial and ethnic dignity and to eradicate racism with all its effects.⁸

The letter also responds to a special urgency in our nation due to escalating divisions between political positions and cultural groups. We know that people of color disproportionately suffer injury and death at the hands of law enforcement. Open Wide Our Hearts names a few of the victims, although the bishops recognize that many people who have lost their lives or freedom because of racial injustices go unnamed. No day goes by without media reports about racial privilege, battles over historical legacies and celebrations, unequal impact of laws and legal enforcement, or the biased impact of social and economic policies. While there has been some progress toward a more just society in the United States, we have seen rising racial tensions in the past decade because white privilege seems so intractable. The so-called great recession of 2008 fanned the flames of conflict and exacerbated poverty, especially among many non-white people. The frustration of those excluded and disinherited due to race remains a perpetual and shameful reminder that racial justice has been long, long delayed. Open Wide Our Hearts recognizes that "racism still infects" our national culture (1).



The church at all levels must work for racial justice.

In their pastoral capacity, the bishops reiterate the basic Christian witness that all people are formed in the image and likeness of God. They call us, as people of faith, to turn from our sins. Using the words of the prophet Micah, they write:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8)

These watchwords shape the letter, which ends with specific directions about how the church at all levels must work for racial justice.

How Can This Study Guide Help Us?

The US bishops have explicitly asked all Catholics to fight to eradicate racism. Given the letter's brevity (a mere 61 paragraphs long), Catholics who want to live up to the call of Open Wide Our Hearts will need assistance. Finding ourselves in the national "story of race" requires soul-searching and honesty, regardless of our identity.⁹ This study guide will lead us through the letter, section by section. As a first step, we'll investigate the context for the letter and learn more about racism, privilege, and culture, drawing a bit on sociology. The later three sections of the letter track the prophet Micah's words according to themes of justice, goodness, and humility, as will this guide:

1. *Do Justice*—explaining our tragic and sinful history of racism to convert our minds;
2. *Love Goodness*—providing scriptural, theological, and moral guidance to form our consciences to convert our hearts; and

3. *Walk Humbly with God*—setting forth how we can convert our actions.

Because the work of racial healing is a journey, not an event, each chapter of the guide also includes questions for reflection and study, and a prayer that meets the feelings and demands of the chapter. An appendix at the back of the book offers resources organized by topic to support our continuing conversion toward racial justice, eliminating racial privilege, and healing our culture.

Understanding racial reconciliation and working toward healing ourselves is a community project. This difficult topic challenges us to listen to things that may be hard to hear, examine our attitudes and actions honestly, and live in new ways that we might never have foreseen. Talking and writing about race, for me, has been a journey of tremendous growth accompanied by stark revelations of my own blind spots and by moments of humiliation. My own background as a white woman, married and raising children with a man of color, privileged with the opportunity of an academic career at a Jesuit university—all of this has allowed me to live what I study and to study what I am living about racial injustice and racial healing. Nevertheless, I recognize that my own biases and presumptions will appear in this guide. I draw on examples and lessons from my own experiences. For the narrowness and biases in this guide, I ask the readers for indulgence and forgiveness. I trust that we share the hope for a better future for the generations to come.

We are called to open wide our hearts so that together we may forge a more loving and more just community. We are strengthened by God's grace to sustain us as we yearn for a community where we truly live as sisters and brothers in Christ. In the synagogue in Nazareth, as Jesus started his public ministry, he read from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. . . .”
He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in
your hearing.” (Luke 4:18-19, 21)

Today is the time for our conversion. We start where we are now—in parish communities, in schools, at our workplaces, and with our families and friends. We must live out Jesus’ liberating love in our own nation—striving with converted hearts to eradicate racism and build just communities. Let’s begin the work of racial healing.

1 Getting Our Bearings on Culture, Racial Privilege, and Conversion

Writing about racial injustice is an enormous challenge by any measure. We often do not know what language to use or whether to start with our nation's past sins or with our present injustices. Racism seems so evidently wrong, yet it remains a "particularly . . . persistent form of evil . . . [It] still infects our nation" after four centuries (1). As Catholics in the United States, we need to acknowledge racial injustice as the sin that distorts our communities, large and small. But confronting racism can often be painful, shameful, and even explosive. Through *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the US bishops urge us to examine our consciences on this sin with the goal of repentance and permanent change to eradicate racism. Love and justice provide the lens for renewal, but to love justly requires a profound, deliberate reorientation of our hearts, minds, and actions.

So let's get our bearings on what we are talking about. This chapter will focus on the letter's introductory section answering the question: "What Is Racism?" Here, the letter describes what racism is and gives examples, which the bishops revisit with more detail in later sections. The introduction closes with a call for conversion, in the words of the prophet Micah: Do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with God.

What Is Racism?

The subtitle of the letter, *The Enduring Call to Love*, stakes out its key theme. God calls us to love and invites us into union in Christ. Racism in our personal relationships and in our institutions is evil because it destroys the unity of the human community. This first section sets forth the problem, describes racism and then explains that it is a sin against justice. Our faith tells us that all people are children of God so that everyone is entitled to respect, dignity, and a just distribution of God's gracious gifts. We are one human family united in Christ. The letter references the Gospel of Matthew to remind us of the second great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39). This means that our love must include all people and assure for everyone the full benefits of a just community.

Racism contradicts Christ's fundamental commandment to love one another, the bishops teach us. Our failure to love fully divides our human communities, particularly in this country. Racism "judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard" (1). The letter teaches that racism arises when a person holds the false belief that another person or group is inferior due to race or ethnicity and this leads to injustice, evidenced by discrimination, mistreatment, and exclusion. This emphasizes that racism is a personal attitude plus an action. Racism is a "destructive and persistent" evil "because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God. When this truth is ignored, the consequence is prejudice and fear of the other, and—all too often—hatred" (1–2). Theologian Margaret Guider offers this complementary definition of racism, encapsulating the bishops'



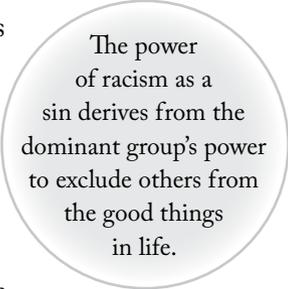
Racism destroys the unity of the human community.

teaching. She writes that racism is “a system by which one race maintains supremacy over another race through a set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures, ideologies, and the requisite power needed to impose them.”¹ The power of racism as a sin derives from the dominant group’s power to exclude others from the good things in life.

Racism is sometimes called America’s “original sin” because it stretches back to the sixteenth century with the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere (4). Europeans exploring and colonizing the American continents justified the genocide of the indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans. The Europeans failed to recognize the people of different cultures and identities as human beings worthy of respect, dignity, and love. These attitudes and actions are the root of an ongoing pattern of racial injustice that marks our original and enduring sin in this nation.

The letter then articulates the varieties of racism that persist today. The bishops remind us of the suffering and violence that men and women of color encounter daily, directing our full attention to the viciousness and volatility of racism. In listing specific examples, the pastoral letter points out the ethnic, racial, and religious harassment reported every day in the news media.

Expressing superiority through comments and disparaging jokes injures others, just as much as violent symbols “such as nooses and swastikas” do (2). The bishops note that people’s silence—our own silence—in the face of racial injustice is itself a sin, a “*sin of omission*” (2, emphasis added). Both personal actions and systemic exclusions are racial injuries that result when we do not consider others worthy of our regard, when we refuse to acknowledge the full human dignity of people of color.



The power of racism as a sin derives from the dominant group’s power to exclude others from the good things in life.

The letter particularly highlights racially unjust structures. Interlocking laws, policies, and customs create systemic and institutional acts of racism, perpetuating rather than repairing past racist oppressions. Unjust systems include injustices stemming from housing segregation, employment discrimination, and disparate educational funding (2). The inequitable enforcement of criminal laws against non-whites is another vivid example, whether it occurs in policing, in courtroom outcomes, or in the prison system (2–3). We often hear about over-policing, which refers to greater police suspicion of communities of color and enforcing criminal laws vigorously against them for less serious infractions. Whether consciously or not, our cultural attitudes pronounce that people of color, compared to whites, are less valuable, less industrious, or more likely to break the law. The bishops admit that regardless of our individual goodwill the “cumulative effects of personal sins of racism have led to social structures of injustice and violence that make us all accomplices” (3).

We need to pause here in reading the letter to address two very sensitive and important aspects of racism. It will help to understand more about structural racism as embedded in the culture, institutions, and laws in our nation and about how racial privilege works.

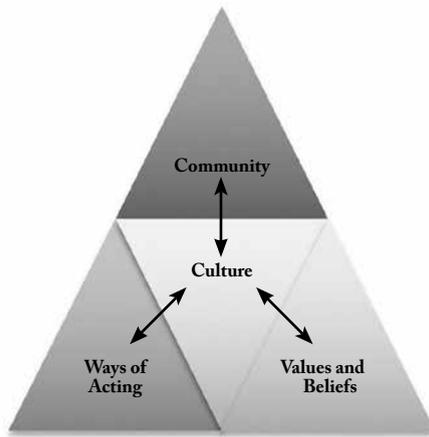
Understanding Structural Racism

Structural racism highlights an important distinction between the personal sins of racism and the social structures of injustice, sometimes called a “culture” of racism. Personal sins include racist actions, such as refusing to socialize with someone of a different background or using racially charged slurs (as the bishops mention). These are painful to people and can be quite violent and harmful. But intolerant actions alone are not enough to sustain a

racially unjust culture. We can still have “racism without racists.”² We actually need a more nuanced understanding of culture and social group power.

The term culture stands for our community’s way of interacting that is anchored in our shared values and meanings, including our stories about how we came to be and what we hope for in the future.³ The sociology of culture studies how people articulate what is important to them as they live together or share a project. Communities develop symbols, values, beliefs, norms, and language to express and preserve their lives together. The cultural expressions are clear to a community’s members but can be obscure to outsiders who do not understand the references or the shared history. After a while, the laws of a community take on a life of their own, becoming almost unbreakable, because people forget why they originally made these choices and policies.

To help us understand how culture works, let’s explore the following diagram and then examine one example from our US culture, the “American Dream.” In the diagram below, the pyramid locates culture as central to community, values, and daily life. Essential community values develop from years of living together, organizing the members’ ways of life, and allowing them to solve common problems. Over time, a community’s values become embedded in their expressions and interactions. Often local laws and public policies will presume and preserve the communities’ sensibilities, even without anyone expressly demanding this. Therefore, past values and customs continue for years and generations in the community’s culture, apart from any one person deliberately deciding to keep the past alive.



Let's consider an example of how culture works. Our nation values education. Public schools assure that every child will be able to participate in our democracy and will be prepared for employment. When the practice of tax-funded public schools emerged in the nineteenth century, there was no school in the summer because children needed to help out on the family farm. Now in the twenty-first century, most towns still do not require summer classes even though only a small percentage of US families farm for a living. Our past economic choices have created the culture that constrains us today.

So, we can notice how we take for granted that the school year must run from fall through spring or early summer. The school year is now nine months because we used to need children on the family farm. Notice also how many of our other institutions are built upon the school year/summer break foundation, including back-to-school sales in August, summer hours for offices, and daylight saving time. The nine-month school year has become natural, obvious, and even required. Thus, the initial convention has become locked-in and reinforced by other practices over nearly two centuries.

Open Wide Our Hearts refers to the idea of locked-in conventions where it reads, “Racism can often be found in our hearts—in many cases placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture” (2). Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that racism persists when people use a racial framework to explain and communicate how the world works, even without realizing it.⁴ Our national framework includes using race to explain personal differences, assign burdens, categorize abilities, and differentiate groups. A cultural framework can become self-legitimizing, meaning that we do not have to explain or justify it; it just is what we have always done. Racial frameworks are especially problematic because they are so vague. They depend on the interpretation of complex circumstances, which allows contradictions and exceptions within the overarching structure. This makes people oblivious to the basic irrationality of dividing and judging people based on physical traits, such as skin color.

When we think about it, we recognize that presumptions about racial superiority are deeply embedded in our cultural structures because of past attitudes. These presumptions, like many cultural legacies, profoundly constrain us because that is how culture works. When we examine these cultural values, we can see that they are historical choices made by our ancestors. Sometimes the choices were based on important priorities, such as free speech and religious freedom. Sometimes the choices were good when they were made, but they no longer apply because our circumstances have changed, like the nine-month school year. Sometimes the choices were evil, like laws that enslaved or excluded others based on racial identity, because the people who came before us had a deeply flawed appreciation of human physical and cultural diversity.

A much more complex and challenging example of how our culture defines us is the idea of the American Dream. We examine it here because it is closely tied to racial identity, even

The American Dream is elusive for many people because of locked-in racism.

though we often miss the connection. The American Dream encapsulates our proud history of working from “rags to riches.” We believe that everyone can succeed with hard work and persistence. People of other nations dream of immigrating to our country because they share the hope of making a better life for their children. The American Dream in the nineteenth century included “a chicken in every pot” or, in the twentieth century, living in a stable neighborhood with a house, a yard, and a school nearby for the kids. The specifics differ in the twenty-first century from prior eras, but the American Dream continues to live in our imaginations and define one of our fundamental values.

While “America” can mean opportunity, hard work, and making a meaningful life for ourselves and those we love, it often is not a real possibility for many groups in our nation. The actual opportunity for a good life is profoundly entwined with racial categories and racial oppression. It is elusive for many people, no matter how hard they work because of locked-in racism. Consider this example. In our country success often is measured in terms of income (earnings per year) and wealth (the value of what a family owns). However, statistical evidence shows that income and wealth are not equal across racial groups. Since the mid-1980s, the net wealth of white households has increased, while the net wealth of non-white households has decreased substantially.⁵ A 2017 Pew Research report, *How Wealth Inequality Has Changed in the U.S. since the Great Recession*, provides these data-based conclusions for the past ten years:

- Among lower- and middle-income households, white families have four times as much wealth as black families and three times as much as Hispanic families.

- Wealth gaps between upper-income families and lower- and middle-income families [in 2017] are at the highest levels recorded [for our nation].
- Upper-income white families have grown wealthier [since 2008, while other groups have not].⁶

Similar data can be found to show the racial disparities in salaries, educational achievement, professional success, health outcomes and lifespan, and incarceration rates.⁷

These statistics, as well as our own experiences, challenge us to consider why racial differences in wealth exist and are becoming even worse, especially if we assert that the American Dream is a real possibility for everyone. Why do these disparities exist if all of us are beloved by God, God is gracious to all, and we are all brothers and sisters in Christ? We realize that our individual situations—where we were born, who our parents are, our race or ethnicity, how much money our family has, how good our schools were—will open or close doors for us.⁸ Despite hard work and an intense desire to do well, most people born into families without education and jobs will remain on the lower end of the economic scale.⁹ The American Dream is not a reality for all people equally in this nation. We can ask ourselves if we believe that differences are “natural” among different groups or whether some people suffer impediments that others do not, and what these might be.

More to the point, we must appreciate that many of our apparently neutral cultural symbols actually carry embedded presumptions about racial identity and value. Even the categories of race or racial identity are cultural conventions. Our next section, therefore, will explore what we mean by race as a cultural category. We will also consider the privileges that racial classifications offer and the burdens they impose on groups in our society.

Race and Racial Privilege

To really embrace the call to conversion in *Open Wide Our Hearts* and eradicate racism, we must not shy away from directly discussing the meaning of race. Because our cultural values are often invisible, as we just discussed, we need to look very hard at racial categories. We often use race or color to identify people, but these labels are quite slippery. When someone claims to be “white” or we say someone is “black,” it is much different than saying “my shoe size is 8” or “he’s tall.” Our labels about skin color, race, and ethnicity actually conceal a whole series of social and cultural judgments about who people are.

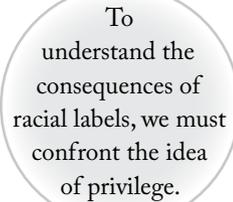
We tend to consider race to be a fundamental aspect of human identity. Perhaps we even think of race as natural and inherited and that our categories are determined by obvious physical attributes only. Certainly, our genes determine the shade of our skin, the shape of our features, and the texture of our hair. But genetic scientists confirm that there are no DNA markers or physical tests to divide people neatly into so-called color groups or ethnic communities.

Let’s try another thought experiment. Reflect now on the way people featured in the media are labeled white, African American, Hispanic American, or Asian American. Think about the appearance of civic leaders, entertainers, professional athletes, and everyday people we see in videos. Many individuals who share the same racial label have quite varied physical qualities. We can notice how we label people according to features and skin tone as well as according to social, political, and economic categories. The information we use to apply a racial label may include where people live, who their parents are, their income, education and speech patterns, and even their music or clothing preferences. Very often our choice to use a particular label for a person shows what we think is important about them. When

we are honest, we must acknowledge that a person's racial label (whether they claim it or we ascribe it to them) means something much more than observable traits. Unfortunately, the way we label people has vital consequences for them in our society.

To understand the consequences of racial labels, we must confront the idea of privilege. We hear the expressions "racial privilege" or "white privilege" in discussions about racism in the media and in daily conversation. Privilege sounds like an accusatory term, but there is a better way to understand what it means. In our society people have all sorts of privileges. Some privileges are earned and well deserved; some are not. Some privileges are just for fun, but many can be oppressive and deadly serious. We can think of a privilege as an advantage, like a teenager who earns the privilege of using the family car through good grades or a traveler who has applied for TSA pre-check for faster security screening at airports. We see television commercials that tout "wealth has its privileges" meaning that people who have money can enjoy life at resorts with fine wine and international cuisine.

Privilege refers generally to a positive or affirmative advantage. When we benefit from an affirmative privilege, others in our circles often share that advantage directly and indirectly. For example, if I own a car, I can drive to work and not be tied to the bus schedule. With a dependable car, I have greater flexibility for work hours and locations. This means I have an advantage in the job market because I have more job choices. Being securely employed (salary, benefits, and preferred location) also means that I have a network of coworkers and friends who likewise are well employed and economically self-sufficient. Perhaps I can leverage my employment advantage into job connections for my children, my siblings, or my friends. In this example, one affirmative privilege translates into a series



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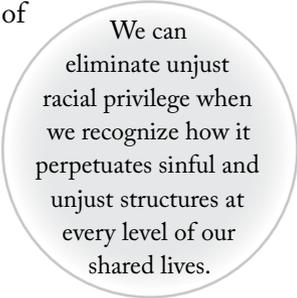
of benefits. I am not burdened by the transportation problems that those without a car face, and I can use my situation to help other people I know. An affirmative privilege becomes racial privilege when we extend our own advantages to others of our same ethnicity or race.¹⁰

A second kind of privilege is restrictive. It refers to withholding advantages from some people. As the opposite of affirmative privilege, restrictive privilege encompasses what we refuse to do for others, how we refuse to give them the “benefit of the doubt.” Let’s try another thought experiment, this time about someone needing help. Imagine someone comes to your door for help because her car has broken down. If she is your neighbor, you’ll help her immediately. If her clothes, grooming, and words are similar to your own or those of your neighbors, you are also likely to help her. The fact that we’re talking about a woman may also have something to do with your decision. Now imagine that a man comes to your door asking for the same help with the same words, but he dresses and speaks in ways that are not familiar to you. What goes through your mind in deciding to help or to give the benefit of the doubt to the person at your door?

Restrictive privilege operates in this example. Our neighbors get advantages from being neighbors, and rightly so. But when people who are different from us approach us, we are less likely to give them the benefit of the doubt. We scrutinize them more suspiciously. We can see how we often make judgments based on cultural presumptions rather than observable facts. Whether or not we deny privileges to others is very often related to what race we label them. The presumptions dictate whether we think of another person as “one of us” or whether we can justifiably ignore their problems.¹¹ The point of this example is not to suggest unwarranted trust but to encourage us to reflect on our cultural presumptions, which are active in even the most mundane exchanges.

As we close this discussion of privilege (and there is so much more to say), we must embrace an important point for construc-

tive conversations around race. Categories of race and practices of racial privilege are some of the deepest, most violent divisions in our nation stretching back centuries. For good reason, racism is “our country’s original sin” (4). Even our brief thought experiments show how racial categories and privileges are locked in. Although we have not made an individual decision to adopt distorted racial values, categories about race and ethnicity govern our social interactions, often with heartbreaking consequences.



We can eliminate unjust racial privilege when we recognize how it perpetuates sinful and unjust structures at every level of our shared lives.

In concluding our discussion of structural racism and racial privilege, here is the main point. Cultural structures and race-based privileges lock in racism. Even without our personal ill will or attitudes of superiority, cultural structures will endure unless we actually reconfigure our lives together to provide full dignity and opportunity for all people in our nation. To the extent we know about racial injustice and take no steps to eliminate it, we can be considered complicit in it. We have reason to hope, however. Because communities of people create cultures, people can change cultures. We can eliminate unjust racial privilege when we recognize how it works and, in particular, how it perpetuates sinful and unjust structures at every level of our shared lives.

We’ll come back to reforming culture when we move to the next section of the letter, *To Do Justice*, in chapter 2. First, we need to discuss the bishops’ final point in this section: conversion.

Conversion

With an overview of the starkest and most disturbing racial injustices before our eyes, *Open Wide Our Hearts* calls us to a “genuine conversion of heart” (4). Genuine conversion must

be personal, as well as a conversion of our church and our communities. Conversion means a radical change of heart that leads to a radical change in behavior, a theme that runs throughout Scripture. The New Testament Greek uses the term *metanoia*, which has sometimes been translated as conversion of mind or heart, and sometimes as repentance. Jesus began his ministry in Galilee calling, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). Conversion means adopting a completely new way of living with others.

Calling us to conversion, *Open Wide Our Hearts* aims to address both the causes of racism and the harms that flow from it (4–5). Conversion necessarily includes our profound realization—even remorse—when we grasp how far we have strayed from God’s call to love. When our conversion is authentic, our new values shape our behavior and we strive to live with integrity to make sure they come alive in our lives. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis defines conversion as “heartfelt repentance and desire to change” (218). *Open Wide Our Hearts* reminds us: “Moving our nation to a full realization of the promise of liberty, equality, and justice *for all* is even more challenging [than individual conversion and action]” (4, emphasis original). Structures of racism are powerful, often oppressing people despite the fact that they are not intended. Conversion in a community setting must yield a new configuration. Our lives together must be restructured because our hearts are converted and realigned to love each other as God loves us.

The introduction to *Open Wide Our Hearts* concludes with Micah’s powerful judgment:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God. (Mic 6:8, cited at 5)

The bishops use this quotation as a road map for conversion and justice. Doing justice means recognizing what justice is and how our national history is a story of injustice for so many people. Loving goodness requires us to examine our national and personal history through the lens of God's love as it is revealed in Scripture. Walking humbly with God demands that our love becomes visible, with the steps that the final section of the letter outlines. We turn now to *Do Justice*.

Questions for Reflection

1. Instead of thinking about racial labels as fixed and objective (like a person's shoe size), what happens when we realize that these categories are judgments about how important a person is?
2. Where have you noticed privilege working for or against you? What would a privilege-free society feel like for you and those you love?

Questions for Study

1. Consider the discussion above about culture and study the diagram. Can you give an example of a cultural value or symbol and use the diagram to trace how it works? Can you identify a symbol that is related to race or ethnic identity?
2. Watch this short video on "Defining the American Dream" (2009) by New York Times journalist Shayla Harris, found online at <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/1194840031120/defining-the-american-dream.html>.
 - What is the American Dream in your own words?

- Which groups in our nation have (and have not) achieved the American Dream? Other than personal talents, what else influences or impedes people's likelihood of securing the American Dream?

Prayer for Open Hearts and Conversion

Good and gracious God, you love each of us with a wide-open love. We pray for our own conversion and the conversion of all your faithful people.

Wake us up to justice!

Racial injustice in our nation and in the world surrounds us and infects us. We hear it in the media, see it in our communities, and recognize it in our mistrusting relationships and personal divisions. We bring these experiences and our broken hearts to you now. We are overwhelmed with the profound sin of our nation.

Wake us up to justice!

We ask you for humble spirits and open hearts to journey from the shackles of racial oppression into the joys of a just community. As a eucharistic community united in Jesus' self-giving love, impassion us to embody justice in our lives together. We are embraced and secure in the breadth and depth of your wide-open love.

Wake us up to justice! Amen.