

Stations of the Cross: Overcoming Racism

People in our day suffer unjustly simply because of the color of their skin or their national origin. Let us acknowledge the sin of racism and work to combat it in our social structures, our institutions, and our hearts.

OPENING PRAYER [condensed from the USCCB *Prayer to Address the Sin of Racism*¹]

ALL: Lord of all, we pray for healing to address the persistent sin of racism, which is the rejection of the full humanity of some of your children, and the talents and potential you have given them. We pray for the grace to recognize the systems that do not support the dignity of every person, that do not promote respect for those who are seen as other, who bear the legacy of centuries of discrimination, fear, and violence. Give us eyes to see how the past has shaped the complex present.

We pray for social structures in which children of color can grow up without fear, in security and dignity, with access to health care and a quality education that will allow them to develop their gifts.

Empower us to create a new way forward, with a new sense of community that embraces and celebrates the rich diversity of all. Help us to live out your call to combat racism and hatred. Show us how to live in compassionate solidarity, supported by your grace and your love. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.



FIRST STATION

Jesus is condemned to death

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Crucify him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified. (Mark 15:14-15)²*

An innocent man is about to be killed, and the laws of the land will not protect him. A crowd has gathered – not to protest, but to cheer. Government leaders are indifferent, more concerned about politics than justice.

Racism leads to many forms of injustice: sometimes death, sometimes imprisonment, sometimes closed doors and lost opportunities. We may not be in a crowd cheering the evil deed, but are we indifferent? It is easy to remain silent even though we may have an opportunity to speak up. Do we object to an inappropriate “joke”? Do we advocate for justice when we have access to people in power? Do we work to open doors in the workplace? Will we be like Pilate and the crowd, or will we use our opportunities to create opportunities for others?

ALL: Christ Jesus, you were a victim of injustice, condemned by those who had the power to save you and ignored by those who might have spoken up on your behalf. Help us to use the opportunities we have to speak out against the injustices around us, knowing that you desire justice for all.



SECOND STATION

Jesus takes up his cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *And carrying the cross himself he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. (John 19:17)*

Pilate could have taken a different approach. But when Jesus said to Pilate, “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice,” Pilate replied dismissively, “What is truth?” (John 18:37-38) In that retort, Pilate embodied the attitude that leads to so much discrimination and injustice in every age.

Too often, we do not want to know the truth. We dismiss the daily discrimination faced by people of color – the disparaging looks, the job interviews that never materialize, the apartments that are suddenly no longer available, the lower-quality educational opportunities, the disproportionate police stops, the discriminatory sentencing rates. We would rather think that our society is color-blind and that everyone has an equal chance. We would rather think that discrimination is merely an occasional aberration rather than a daily reality. The truth, however, is that racism is an endemic part of life in our culture.

ALL: Jesus, help us to acknowledge the truth with honesty and courage. The injustices caused by racism are far too common and impose heavy crosses on our brothers and sisters. Help us to speak the truth about the magnitude of the injustices they face.



THIRD STATION

Jesus falls for the first time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Yet it was our pain that he bore, / our sufferings he endured. Though harshly treated, he submitted / and did not open his mouth; / Like a lamb led to slaughter / or a sheep silent before shearers, / he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:4a,7)*

Jesus accepted his cross and carried it valiantly despite his weakened state. But he could not bear up under the load. He fell.

Racism imposes heavy burdens, too. African Americans must live with ugly taunts, nooses, and expressions of white supremacy. Jews face swastikas. Muslims encounter insults and rejection. Native Americans are derided for trying to preserve their cultures. Latinos are labeled with ugly slurs. Asians are reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes. Refugees and immigrants endure xenophobic rhetoric and constant suspicion. Those who are targets of racism often live with the persistent fear that hatred will explode – again – into stark violence against them.

Will we leave our brothers and sisters to bear the cross of racism alone? Or will we step out in solidarity and accompany them as they travel their own “way of the cross”?

ALL: Jesus, the cross of injustice is heavy. Help us not to dismiss it as just “the way things are,” but rather to acknowledge the crosses others must bear because they are different, and to find ways to accompany them in their journey.



FOURTH STATION

Jesus meets his mother

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, “. . . (you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed” And his mother kept all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:34-35,51)*

Mary was cautioned from the beginning that the blessing of bearing Jesus would come with a cost. The joys and the sorrows were mingled in her unflinching heart.

A mother’s pain is no different in communities of color today. When her child suffers, she suffers. When her child is deprived of opportunity, she aches. When her child is beaten, she nurses the wounds. And when her child is murdered, she identifies the body at the morgue.

But the pain often begins long before then. African American mothers launch their teenagers toward independence with “the Talk” about how to survive a traffic stop. Undocumented immigrant mothers go to work every day with contingency plans for who will care for their children if they are detained or deported.

Jesus looked into the eyes of his mother and felt her pain. Will we be like him and stand with the mothers who store up so much grief and anxiety in their tender hearts?

ALL: Jesus, although at this time you could not relieve your mother’s fears, you did acknowledge her pain. Help us to stand with anxious and grieving mothers and work to end the injustices that besiege them.



FIFTH STATION

Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, . . . to carry his cross. (Mark 15:21)*

Simon of Cyrene did not volunteer to help Jesus. But his very presence meant that Jesus was not totally alone. He had at least one person by his side as he struggled to drag his cross up the hill.

What could be lonelier than facing racism on your own? It is bad enough that some people experience injustices inflicted on them, that they hear insults hurled at them. How much more isolating would it be, if they were led to believe that the whole population shared this hatred.

Although Simon did not have a choice but to help carry Jesus’s cross, we do. We can overlook a racist comment, or we can challenge it and explain why. We can keep our distance, or we can reach out to connect with someone who has been pushed to the peripheries of our society. We can stay in our own lanes, or we can work to lift our society to a higher place.

ALL: God, you have arranged the universe so that one person’s action can help ease the burden of another. Embolden us to reach out and to speak out, to make others’ crosses easier to bear.



SIXTH STATION

Veronica wipes the face of Jesus

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, / no beauty to draw us to him. / He was spurned and avoided by men, / . . . and we held him in no esteem. (Isaiah 53:2b-3)*

Crowned with thorns and then struck repeatedly on the head with a reed, covered with blood, sweat, and dust, Jesus's face on that day would have been difficult to behold. Many would have turned away. Yet Veronica pushed forward and offered Jesus her veil to wipe his face. When he returned it to her, the image of his face was miraculously imprinted on the cloth. Veronica's act of love and charity was beautiful, and she is forever remembered for it.

How do you react when you see someone who is suffering unjustly? The human tendency is to avoid eye contact, to walk quickly away. In short, we do not get involved. This allows the injustice to continue.

Yet Veronica did get involved. She saw the suffering of another person and reached out to help – at the risk of drawing attention to herself.

ALL: Jesus, so many of our brothers and sisters suffer daily from the injustice of racism. Give us the gift of courage to be like Veronica and reach out to those whom society has rejected and show them love.



SEVENTH STATION

Jesus falls for the second time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *“Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. (Luke 10:30-33)*

Jesus fell a second time under the weight of the cross. He suffered immensely for his willingness to identify with our humanity. Undoubtedly, some who saw him were quick to look down on him unsympathetically, as being a criminal.

One of the signs of prejudice is to separate ourselves from those we deem unworthy or inferior. Applying such biased thinking to whole groups, is a signal that racism has infected our thinking – like the hostility between Samaritans and the Jews in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. As soon as we start mentally separating people based on racial or ethnic stereotypes, we judge falsely and break the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

ALL: God, it is easy to fall into the trap of biased thinking without even being aware of it. Help us to accept all people as individuals with unique dignity, and not to divide them up based on their membership in some favored or disfavored group.



EIGHTH STATION

Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children.” (Luke 23:27-28)*

The women of Jerusalem were able to see beyond themselves and grieve the injustice done to Jesus.

When we see injustices caused by racism, how do we react? Do we care? Do we weep? For those most at risk, racism is a daily source of anxiety and anguish. For others, it takes an intentional decision to care. The women of Jerusalem made Jesus’s cause their own. Will we show the same concern?

The next time a person of color is killed – like Trayvon, Eric, Michael, Laquan, Tamir, Walter, Alton, Philando, Magdiel, or Hector– will we join the affected communities in saying that these lives intrinsically valuable? When the next synagogue or mosque is attacked, will we speak out? Will we insist that the racism that affects anyone is a concern for all? Or will we ignore it when it has not happened in our community? For whom shall we weep?

ALL: Jesus, you call us to speak out against all injustice, not just the injustices that hurt our own communities. Help us to develop hearts that beat with genuine compassion when anyone’s community suffers injustice.



NINTH STATION

Jesus falls for the third time

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *“You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them. Woe to you!” (Luke 11:46b-47a)*

Jesus is weighed down by the weight of the cross, as though bearing the sins of the whole world.

Racism is a cross most often borne by people of color, but it is not just an individual burden. It has community-wide impacts. Our nation’s social structures and political institutions maintain policies and practices that magnify the sufferings of communities of color. As a result, systemic racism persists.

Tragedies such as the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, usually fall most heavily on minority communities. Toxic waste sites and industrial facilities that pollute the water and air are more likely to be located near communities of color. Low-income people of color are hit hardest by hurricanes like Katrina and Harvey and find it hardest to recover. Children of color suffer lead poisoning disproportionately. Differences in the distribution of educational resources disadvantage African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Our social structures have allowed patterns of systemic racism to persist. We must work to change these patterns.

ALL: Jesus, the call to change social and economic structures that perpetuate racism can be uncomfortable. Help us to acknowledge the roots of racial injustice and work to change them.



TENTH STATION

Jesus is stripped of his garments

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *They stripped off his clothes. . . (Mt 27:28)*

Part of the humiliation of crucifixion was that the prisoner was stripped naked, left totally exposed. This was done in an attempt to deny the condemned person's dignity.

Racism also attempts to strip others of their dignity. While our human dignity is an indelible gift from God, racist attitudes and actions undermine the human dignity of the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Our nation's history is tarnished by the enslavement of African Americans, Jim Crow laws, mistreatment of Native Americans, Chinese exclusion laws, Japanese internment camps, and anti-Hispanic discrimination. These patterns of racism flourished in part because "good" people too often remained silent.

If racism flourishes, we are all implicated – especially in a democracy. We are called to transform our society with God's love. Yet our society still allows some to be stripped of their dignity. As members of the Body of Christ, our dignity is intertwined with theirs. How can we not stand humiliated before the cross, knowing that we have failed to adequately protect the dignity of all our brothers and sisters?

ALL: Jesus, in becoming human you ratified the dignity of all humanity. Help us see every person's dignity as important as our own and create social structures that promote dignity for all.



ELEVENTH STATION

Jesus is crucified

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *But he was pierced for our sins, / crushed for our iniquity. / He bore the punishment that makes us whole, / by his wounds we were healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross so that we might be healed of all that separates us from God and each other. Each person must turn away from habits and patterns of sin in order to be transformed.

It is easy to recognize an individual sin of racism when someone violates justice or fails to extend the love of Christ to others. But even people who want to live justly cannot escape the taint of racism. When our social structures uphold injustice and perpetuate the effects of racism, we all become, in the words of the U.S. Catholic bishops, "accomplices in racism."³ This complicity may not be intentional. Nevertheless, the structures of sin in our own society unfairly deprive some of their basic human rights. When we fail to speak out against these structures and reform them, our complicity cannot be ignored.

Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world. Just as our sinful acts must be forgiven at the cross, so too our failures to act when it was our duty to act must be forgiven at the cross. Racism and the structures of systemic racism that still bedevil us must be confessed and transformed by our loving Savior.

ALL: Savior, forgive us for the sins we have committed and also for the sins of omission that allow injustice to persist. Help us to stand up to the structures of sin and become accomplices in the work of justice.



TWELFTH STATION

Jesus dies on the cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Jesus cried out in a loud voice, . . . “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” . . . [Then] Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. . . . When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”* (Mark 15:34,37,39)

(All kneel together for a reflective pause, and then rise.)

Jesus expressed the feeling of abandonment often experienced by those who are unjustly treated. The centurion recognized the injustice that had taken place and testified to the truth.

We are called to be united with those who suffer injustice. Their pain should be our pain. Like that centurion, we should be the ones affirming the worth of those rejected by others. Are we willing to acknowledge injustice and see others in a new way, to connect with them and testify to their pain?

An examination of conscience might help: Am I taking time to learn the stories of past oppression? Am I actively seeking to listen to the cries of our brothers and sisters who experience racism and rejection today? Am I working to change unjust policies? Do I need to root out attitudes in myself that devalue or cast suspicion on others? Am I taking intentional steps to welcome the stranger, socialize with people from other communities, and learn about people from other cultures, races, and backgrounds?⁴

ALL: Jesus, Son of God, when no one else cares, you care. You call us to care as well. Lead us to an ever-deeper conversion that bears fruit in true solidarity with those who suffer from racism.



THIRTEENTH STATION

Jesus is taken down from the cross

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, . . . came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. . . . Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb.* (Mark 15:43,46a)

In order to claim Jesus’s body and give him a proper burial, Joseph of Arimathea sacrificed his own comfort and safety and risked angering the powers of his day. We need to dismantle the structures of racist sin in our day, and we may need to risk our own comfort and safety to do so.

The U.S. Catholic bishops call us to change the structures of society. They say: “The roots of racism have extended deeply into the soil of our society. 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.”⁵ Working to change economic and social policies is not easy. Like Joseph of Arimathea, we will need courage. But we cannot remain silent. We must engage with others in respectful conversations and take action to reform structures that perpetuate injustice.

ALL: Jesus, the structures of your day were indifferent to the demands of justice. Give us the courage to transform our institutions so that the work of racial justice may bear fruit.



FOURTEENTH STATION

Jesus is laid in the tomb

Leader: We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you.

ALL: Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

Leader: *Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it [in] clean linen and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed. (Mt 27:59-60)*

When the stone was rolled across the entrance to the tomb, marking with finality the apparent end of Jesus's life, all seemed lost. The hope of the world was gone. But the tomb was not the end of the story.

Racism, in all its ugly forms, is also not the end of the story. Jesus makes all things new. He can transform our hearts, and he can help us transform our social structures and institutions to remove the scourge of racism.

Before God we are one human race, and God desires that we dwell in harmony with one another. The U.S. bishops offer inspiration from the prophet Micah: "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" (Micah 6:8). This is our task. Empowered by God's Spirit, we must humbly but fearlessly engage in the work of racial justice.

ALL: Jesus, inspire us with new approaches to the ancient problem of racism. We are your hands and feet. Guide us as we welcome those who are marginalized and as we work for racial justice.

CLOSING PRAYER

ALL: Loving God, you call us from every race and ethnicity to be one human family. Our nation has fallen far short of that goal. Too many of our brothers and sisters are ignored, ostracized, mistreated, and even killed because of the evil of racism. Too often, our own ways of thinking are infected by the messages of exclusion and marginalization around us.

Transform our hearts, renew our minds, and inspire our actions to effectively address and overcome racism in our day. Help us form new relationships, transform social structures, and reform public policies to establish justice for all. Then all of us will be able to approach you as one people, equal in our dignity, magnificent in our variety, and joyful in our unity, so that this world may be all that you intend it to be. Amen.



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³ *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p. 5. See www.usccb.org/racism/.

⁴ Self-examination drawn from "The Call to Address Racism in Our Hearts and Communities," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018. See "Bulletin Inserts" on the Parish Resources page at www.usccb.org/racism.

⁵ *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2018, p. 28. See www.usccb.org/racism/.