

Louisiana Interchurch Conference

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ON RACIAL RECONCILIATION AND SOLIDARITY

I would like to begin with some vignettes reflecting one person's interactions with race and racism in this city and elsewhere.

In August 1959, I was a young teenager riding back across the Deep South to New Orleans for the beginning of school, having left most of my family back in Florida on vacation. The bus grew strangely quiet as we passed through a small South Mississippi town. In a conspiratorial hush, a voice behind me whispered to his companion, "This is where the lynching was." I was shocked by the harsh reality so near me there in the hot summer; it cast a dark shadow over the near-idyllic memories of family intimacy and fun on the beach. The relative quiet of the fifties was giving way to the turbulent beginnings of the sixties when civil rights sit-ins, marches, and violence would turn our well-ordered world and my young self-awareness upside down.

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My family lived in neighborhoods that were racially segregated, although the history and demographics of New Orleans put black and white neighborhoods in closer proximity than in most other large cities of the South or North. My contemporaries and I had no black friends or peers, although we often roller-skated on the same streets as black youth and walked past one another on the way to our separate schools.

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Being Catholic, however, put a different slant on things. Our family had Irish, French, Italian, Scotch-Irish, and German lines. We knew about the Klan: that we, along with the Jews and Negroes, were part of their three Ks of hatred. Though our Catholic schools had been as segregated as the public system in the forties and fifties, articulate voices of reason and compassion in the Catholic community were threatening the social *status quo* which we young white Southerners had imbibed with the air and water.

My awakening conscience was confronted first by a string of young Jesuit teachers in high school who questioned the assumptions that underlay a separate-but-equal mythology. They challenged us to reach beyond the prejudices of our families and society to a civil and gospel equality. The response of some of my fellow students was often hostile, as parental truths crashed against teacher truths. Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel also had stunned the church and city when he took a strong public stand against segregation in the fifties and later

excommunicated prominent segregationist leaders—the ultimate Catholic sanction. He in turn received some seventy death threats in an atmosphere that smelled to him of schism at times.¹

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When the city buses were integrated, many of us confronted our first agonizing break with a tradition that would have us stand rather than take vacant seats next to blacks or get to our feet if a black person sat next to us. Of course, notorious bus incidents were covered by TV and newspaper. But on most ordinary buses of New Orleans’ enviable city transit system many young students like me took part in an unpublicized drama of social change. Its scenes were marked by angry words and stage whispers, human courtesy and individual heroism, bigotry and openness. On our better days, we learned to offer our seats to black women tired from a long day of work, just as we had been taught to do for white women. The so-called New South was being born in our impressionable minds, whether we liked it or not.

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In December, 1973, I left Atlanta after my first years of legal services practice to study theology in Chicago. As a going away present, a friend gave me a book by Ivan Allen, Jr., entitled *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*. As mayor, Allen had presided over the progressive transformation of Atlanta during the turbulent sixties. Atlanta’s changes stood in contrast for me with the tradition-bound conservatism of New Orleans, which had preferred to be a queen of the Old South rather than a molder of the New.

By my late-twenties, I had taught catechism to rural, poor black youth as a Jesuit novice, written an unpublished book on the racial and economic politics of the War on Poverty in South Louisiana while in college, moderated a black Catholic youth group and done volunteer work in a black public high school during philosophy studies in Mobile, and represented hundreds of black and white clients in Atlanta. When I took up Allen’s book, then, I read with a sense of vividness and poignancy about his experience with crossing the color line in Atlanta in 1947 to promote the Community Chest Drive (forerunner to the United Way). Allen had sought the advice of his father about an invitation to speak at the kickoff of the drive in the Negro community, to which the elder Allen responded: [apology for the N-word]

Ivan, let me have a very honest discussion with you,” he said in his office the day I went to see him. “My generation has completely failed in every way to enlighten or solve the major issue which our section of the country has: the racial issue. We haven’t confronted ourselves with it. There is great prejudice, great trial and tribulation over the whole thing. We’ve kept the nigger not in a second-class but in a third or fourth-class position, and as a result we’ve impoverished him and we’ve impoverished this section of the country. And the Southeast will never amount to anything until it brings its level of citizenship up. The very idea: here we are advocating human decency and freedom all over the world, and we find ourselves with dirty skirts at home. It’s time for some major changes. **Your generation is going to be confronted with it, and it will be the greatest agony that any generation ever went through.**”²

By the time I read these lines, many American cities had been burned in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination; the Kerner Commission Report had described two Americas, one white and prospering, the other black and languishing; and the Vietnam War and the impeached Nixon presidency seemed to have distracted us from the tragic realities of race and poverty at home.

That made the advice from Ivan Allen, Sr., thirty years earlier, all the more prophetic and painful. What he said confirmed the truth of what I had seen and felt as events had swirled around me since grammar school. It also promised that our future pain would be all the more searing the longer we deferred the question of racial injustice in America.

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To jump forward forty years, the legacy of slavery, racial segregation, and racial separation lives on in my own experience of living in a Jesuit Community at Loyola which is composed of 15 white men, although I have Jesuit brothers of all races in other parts of the country and the world.

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We all have our own stories of race and racism. In 2006 Archbishop Hughes of New Orleans published a Pastoral Letter on Racial Harmony entitled, *Made in the Image and Likeness of God*. In it he first acknowledged:

As most of you know, I come from Boston, Massachusetts. The community in which I lived was totally white, so I did not interact with those of other races in my neighborhood or church or school. It was not until seminary that I experienced the friendship of African and Asian American fellow students.³

In that pastoral letter Archbishop Hughes tells the story of court order school de-segregation in Boston—almost twenty years after the U.S. Supreme Court ordered desegregation in 1954 “with all deliberate speed.” The “speed” of our national school desegregation, as we know, took decades and was produced only by hundreds of lawsuits and court orders.

Along the way, as Archbishop Hughes noted in Boston and we have seen in Louisiana, whites fled the public schools to private and parochial schools and “Christian Academies.” And now that momentum for change has reversed itself. As we noted in our Jesuit Social Research Institute *JustSouth Index 2016*:

Following a set of Supreme Court decisions in the late 1960s and 1970s that required Department of Education officials to oversee implementation of school desegregation plans, the rate of black students attending majority-white schools increased dramatically, growing from 1 percent in 1963 to 43 percent in 1983.⁴³ After federal oversight was phased out and schools were left to make good faith efforts to maintain integration, there was significant backsliding. In 2012, 74 percent of black students and 80 percent of Latino students attended schools that were 50 to 100 percent minority,

and of these, more than 40 percent of black and Latino students attended schools that were 90 to 100 percent minority.⁴

So much for our school segregation, which often reflects the entrenched patterns of residential segregation here and across the nation. In that same *JustSouth Index*, we used three measures to look at racial disparity in all fifty states and the District of Columbia: public school segregation, white-minority wage equity, and white-minority employment equity. The graphic for Louisiana of nine indicators on poverty, racial disparity, and immigrant exclusion is included in your packets. As noted in that study [p. 28]:

Louisiana ranks 49 of 51 in the Racial Disparity Dimension, which is attributable to the large gap in earnings between white and minority workers in similar occupations and high rates of unemployment for non-white job seekers. While Louisiana does have a state law barring employment discrimination based on race, the state must enhance its investigative and educational activities to ensure that all workers have an equal opportunity to earn a fair wage. Further, the percentage of schools segregated by race in Louisiana is significantly higher than in other states. [Dimension Index Score: .44 out of 1]

As for our churches, as Dr. David Otto reminded the LIC Annual Assembly in March, Martin Luther King, Jr. once noted, **“Sunday at 11:00 AM is the most segregated time of the week.”**⁵

Since Dr. Otto’s address, we have now experienced the spring and summer of 2016: police killings of Black men and widespread community reactions; killing of police by Black men; the Baton Rouge area floods with a devastating impact in poor, Black neighborhoods; the Black Lives Matter movement; and a presidential campaign tragically marred with racism and worse. In addition, we know that Louisiana leads the nation—which leads the world—in incarceration; and that incarceration predominantly impacts men of color.

So, what are we Christian leaders to do? Shared pulpits and ecumenical and inter-racial celebrations of the holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King are woefully inadequate.

First, we must recognize the reality of individual racism and structural racism. What is racism? As Dr. Otto noted, using a common definition, it is “prejudice wedded to power, either real or imagined.”⁶ Racism comes in two major forms, as Archbishop Hughes emphasized:

We need to recognize that racism can be both personal and institutional. It is personal when it is expressed in attitudes or convictions that lead to racial slurs or the depreciation of the value and the gifts of those of another race or culture either in word or in behavior (cf. Jas3:1-12). It can exist even within one race when shades of color lead to unjust discrimination.

It is institutional when the organizations in which we live foster attitudes or practices that lead to unjust discrimination (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-26). Institutional racism exists in our broader society in economic and political life, our educational systems, and our housing or living patterns.⁷

As the Archbishop also noted, institutional racism also exists in our churches. So does individual racism, although it often masks itself in attitudes of white superiority or privilege or the many other overt and subtle ways in which individuals can de-value the person, gifts, experiences, or contributions of others of a different race.

I want to focus here on institutional or structural racism as a species of what theologians have described as social sin for the last forty or fifty years. The frequent acknowledgement of the reality of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious systems and structures—and the power which they exert over our ability to live Gospel values—marks one of the most critical insights in Christian theology in the last fifty years. As the US bishops observed in 1986:

Whether the problem is preventing war and building peace or addressing the needs of the poor, Catholic teaching emphasizes not only the individual conscience, but also the political, legal and economic structures through which policy is determined and issues are adjudicated.⁸

Theologians and bishops describe “sinful social structures” as those which do what sin does: dehumanize individuals and groups, devalue human life, break up families, alienate races, escalate violence, and spread poverty. These systems and institutions socialize us, promoting and reinforcing values and behaviors that we would call “sinful.” They shape us and our behavior and attitudes in ways we do not recognize and thus can hardly acknowledge, much less change.

Theologians also now speak of “graced social structures” as those which do what grace does: promote life, enhance human dignity, encourage the development of community, and reinforce caring and responsible behaviors.

More obvious sinful structures have origins tainted with values, intentions, or activities that we call sinful. Consider, for example, child prostitution rings, criminal syndicates, and slavery. The novel development in recent theology is that even well-intentioned institutions can become sinful when they produce unintended ill effects or slowly become destructive of human values or human life, failing to change with the times or reality.

Consider these examples: we have schools that do not teach; prisons that do not rehabilitate; cities that do not work; governments that are unresponsive to people’s real needs; an agriculture system that pays farmers not to grow while many people go hungry; a health care system that still leaves out 30 million people even after the Affordable Care Act; an immigration system that brutalizes people and tears up families; and an economic system that is making some people very, very rich and billions of other people poorer. The repeated message of the churches is that the situation is getting worse, not better. In fact, the social,

economic and political systems are working so badly that Latin American Catholic bishops have felt compelled to speak of “institutionalized violence” as the end-product of the status quo.

One of the dangers of this analysis—whether it apply to economic injustice or racial injustice—is that individuals who understand even viscerally about social systems and structures can excuse themselves from any responsibility for change by pleading, “It’s the system” or “Racism is too entrenched” or “What can one person do?”

In his 1987 encyclical letter on *The Social Concerns of the Church*, Pope Saint John Paul II seems at first to accept the analysis of sinful social structures which I have described. His term is the "structures of sin," but his analysis ties these structures much more acutely to the acts of individuals.

...it is not out of place to speak of "structures of sin" which, as I stated in my apostolic exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, are rooted in personal sin and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior.⁹

In a footnote, the Pope lays out four ways in which individuals are responsible for sinful social structures, quoting his earlier apostolic exhortation [NB: I have added the four numbers]:

Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins. It is a case of (1) the very personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it; (2) of those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence, through secret complicity or indifference; (3) of those who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world and (4) also of those who sidestep the effort and sacrifice required, producing specious reasons of a higher order. The real responsibility, then, lies with individuals. A situation -- or likewise an institution, a structure, society itself -- is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad."¹⁰

Human responsibility is thus retained in John Paul's analysis in that the human relationship to all sinful institutions and systems is as: (1) creators, supporters, or exploiters; (2) accessories through complicity or indifference; (3) accessories through fatalistic avoidance; and (4) accessories through consecration of the status quo. (Churches, of course, are the most articulate exponents of consecration of social systems or structures, both in the world around them and within the churches themselves.) The pope attributes structures of sin to two powerful forces: “desire for profit” and “thirst for power.”

We can apply this analysis to the legal or de facto segregation with which Archbishop Hughes and I grew up or, currently, to the stark racial disparities which continue to be entrenched in contemporary systems and structures in Louisiana and throughout the nation.

To paraphrase his four ways of responsibility, John Paul used the word “sins” to apply to (1) those who create or exploit these injustices, (2) those who do nothing through complicity or indifference, (3) those who say there is nothing we can do because it is “the system,” and (4) those who think everything is fine because we have eliminated legal segregation and discrimination on the books and even elected a Black president. All of us who fit in any of these categories share responsibility for the continued existence of these injustices.

So, again the question: What are we Christian leaders to do? I would like to answer in terms of two fundamentally religious concepts: reconciliation and solidarity.

Reconciliation

Once we have acknowledged the reality of racism and racial injustice, a first Christian response is to hear the call of the Lord to be reconciled with one another.

1. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus inaugurates his public ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth.¹¹ Reading from the prophet *Isaiah*, and acknowledging being anointed by the Spirit, he announces good news to the poor, the release of captives, the recovery of sight by the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. With this action he roots himself and his ministry in the tradition of the Jewish prophets who passionately proclaimed God’s justice, the duty of Israel to establish right relationships with God, with one another, especially the least among them, and with the land. This threefold duty took on special significance in the Jubilee year, “the year of the Lord’s favour” which Jesus announces and embodies.¹²
2. In proclaiming God’s message of love and compassion Jesus crosses over physical and socio-religious frontiers. His message of reconciliation is preached both to the people of Israel and to those living outside its physical and spiritual frontiers: tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and persons of all kinds who are marginalized and excluded. His ministry of reconciliation with God and with one another knows no boundaries. He speaks to the powerful challenging them to a change of heart. He reaches out to the poor, showing them his special love for the sinner, the poor widow, and the lost sheep. The kingdom of God which he constantly preaches becomes a vision for a world where all relationships are reconciled in God. Jesus confronts the powers that oppose this kingdom, and that opposition leads him to the cross, a death which he freely accepts in keeping with his mission. On the cross we see how all his words and actions are revealed as expressions of the final reconciliation effected by the Crucified and Risen Christ, the new creation when all relationships will be set right in God.
3. Reconciliation thus becomes an essential role for the Christian community and Christian leaders. With specific reference to the ways racism divides, there are ways in which Christian churches can promote racial reconciliation, a few of which I am now listing:
 - (i) That pastors and pastoral staffs sponsor and participate in workshops and programs on individual and structural racism, including racial and cultural sensitivity, in order to incorporate into parish life and ministry initiatives that foster racial harmony.

- (ii) That churches (who are not already engaged) consider twinning or similar programs with another church of different racial or cultural background in order to promote fellowship including exchange of choirs, prayer groups, service, and social justice projects.
- (iii) That congregations explore effective ways to ensure a welcoming hospitality to those who are racially or culturally different.
- (iv) That congregations regularly offer prayers for racial harmony.
- (v) That congregations seek ways to collaborate with civic and interfaith groups to promote racial and social justice.
- (vi) That congregations sponsor interracial peace walks in the streets of their cities and towns.

Solidarity

Engaging in racial reconciliation efforts, while extremely valuable, is not enough. If the systems are not working, then our faith response has to be structural as well as personal. We must do justice as well as charity. Specific action directed toward the injustice of institutions includes (1) reforming existing institutions, (2) strengthening graced institutions, and (3) developing new institutions and structures to right past wrongs and insure a just and equitable future. [As Ignatius of Loyola writes in his *Spiritual Exercises*: “Love shows itself in deeds not words.”]

Pope Saint John Paul underscored the urgency of connecting action for justice to faith in a term clearly reflecting his Polish background, the **duty of solidarity**. Solidarity was his term for the structural response demanded by gospel love and involving fundamental economic and social changes. In a blunt assertion, he says, “Solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue.”¹³ He explained this in a much quoted passage:

*This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.*¹⁴

This solidarity takes concrete form, the pope wrote, in personal decisions, decisions of government, economic decisions, public demonstrations by the poor, sacrifice of all forms of imperialism, and in a variety of other concrete actions, both personal and structural.

Some people would argue that one of the most practical ways to promote racial reconciliation and solidarity simultaneously is to bring together people of diverse races to work together, not explicitly on racism, but to change the structures that perpetuate injustice and

inequality, such as our broken schools, overcrowded prisons, flood-prone regions, tax injustice, and inadequate health systems and services. We have seen many of these kinds of efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as we grapple together with failing schools, an overcrowded and violent jail, failed levees, and more effective health care delivery. In the Louisiana Interchurch Conference, we also have a common endeavor in our *Bread or Stones Campaign* designed to bring us all together to improve the lot of Louisiana’s children who languish in so many ways.

Conclusion

When we look at the long, terrible history of race in this country, this state, and in our own churches, we can be tempted to despair of effective change. To do so runs against the very teaching of our faith that God’s power and fidelity far outstrips the power of evil and the call to Christian disciples to be people of hope in the face of hard times and tough challenges. Jesus tells us many hope-filled stories of small seeds growing into great harvests.

In 1986, Czech Poet-President Václav Havel described hope in words that for me capture the distinctiveness of this virtue and its ability to help all of us to continue at their difficult work even in hard times. I quoted this text some years ago to an LIC audience, but it bears repeating here in the face of racism and racial injustice and the call to racial reconciliation and solidarity.

Either we have hope within us or we don’t; it is a dimension of the soul, and it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. . . .

Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. . . . It is this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.¹⁵

What Havel describes as “hopeless conditions” in the final lines quoted here is his homeland under communism. Amazingly, three years later, communism collapsed in most of Europe. What so many people had hoped and prayed for during so many years suddenly became a reality. As people of hope, we can do the same to create a society built upon the goal of the common good of each and all of us.

¹ C.J. McNaspy, S.J., *At Face Value* (New Orleans: Institute of Human Relations, 1978), p. 80.

² Ivan Allen, Jr., *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), pp. 13-14 (emphasis supplied).

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- ³ Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, a Pastoral Letter on Racial Harmony, *Made in the Image and Likeness of God*, December 16, 2006.
- ⁴ Jesuit Social Research Institute, *The JustSouth Index 2016*, March 2016, citing U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. National Center for Education Statistics. 2012. Common Core of Data. Washington, DC. And Darling-Hammond, Linda. 2004. "Inequality and the Right to Learn: Access to Qualified Teachers in California's Public Schools." *Teachers College Record*, vol. 106, no. 10: pp. 1936-1966.
- ⁵ Dr. David D. Otto, "The Church, Social Transformation, and Racial Reconciliation," Address to the Louisiana Interchurch Conference Annual Assembly, March 8, 2016, p. 1.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- ⁷ Hughes, *op.cit.*, p. 4.
- ⁸ *Economic Justice for All*, No. 259.
- ⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (The Social Concern of the Church), December 30, 1987, No. 36 (Origins, March 3, 1988, Vol. 17, No. 38).
- ¹⁰ *Sollicitudo*, footnote 65, quoting *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, AAS 77 (1985), p. 217 (numbers inserted in text).
- ¹¹ Lk 4,18-19.
- ¹² John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1994, 11-13.
- ¹³ *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 40.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 38.
- ¹⁵ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Huizdala* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), chapter 5