

Archbishop Lori says pastoral on racism ‘most welcome’ in Archdiocese of Baltimore

After almost four years of discussion, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops overwhelmingly **approved a pastoral letter** against racism Nov. 14 at its meeting in Baltimore.

“Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism,” calls racist acts sinful because they violate justice.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, who served as a consultant to the committee drafting the pastoral, said the pastoral is “most welcome” in the archdiocese. He said the archdiocese is putting together a dialogue process for which the pastoral will be a great help.

He hopes that priests and bishops in the archdiocese will preach and teach about the pastoral and quote it widely, as well as having it inform the work of those at the archdiocesan level.

The last time the bishops as a body issued a pastoral about racism was in 1979. Although individual bishops have issued pastoral reflections about racial issues since then – including a reflection on the 50th anniversary of the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. issued in February 2017 by Archbishop Lori – there has been progress in some areas but regression in other areas, according to Bishop Shelton J. Fabre of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, La., who chaired the bishops’ Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism as it completed the amendments on “Open Wide Our Hearts.”

Unfortunately, “racism has the ability to adapt with the times,” he said. In the past, the bishops addressed the evils of personal racism. In the late 1970s, racism was almost always seen in terms of a black-white issue.

“Racism is no longer just a black-white issue now with many, many ethnicities and

racism that are part of the United States and part of the church in the United States. We see it even raising its ugly head with regard to other cultural families,” Bishop Fabre said in an interview with the Catholic Review during the bishops’ meeting.

The chairman said one of the highlights of the new pastoral is that the bishops now recognize racism as a life issue. He said it is not equated with abortion, which is chief among the life issues.

“Racism is a life issue because it really attacks the human dignity of a person. It is an invitation on the part of each and every person to really do some reflecting: How is it that I might not be respecting someone’s human dignity? And if I am not respecting that, why am I not respecting that?” Bishop Fabre said.

He said the bishops know that the document alone will not end racism, but his committee has been tasked with implementing it, so there are accompanying lesson plans for kindergarten through 12th grade for use in Catholic schools and religious education programs. He hopes bishops and priests will preach about racism and encourage conversations about it.

“It is my hope that (people) would know this is going to be a constructive dialogue, and it’s a place that they can trust that they will be heard and they’ll be able to share their own stories,” Bishop Fabre said.

The bishops also voted Nov. 14 to affirm the work that the Diocese of Jackson, Miss., has begun to advance on the local level the cause for **canonization** of Sister Thea Bowman, F.S.P.A. Sister Bowman, a popular speaker, evangelist and activist for African-American Catholics, died in 1990 at age 52.

Archbishop Lori recalled that while he worked in Washington in the 1980s, he met Sister Bowman at a meeting with Cardinal James Hickey, for whom then-Father Lori was secretary. “I was privileged to meet her, and I believe she was already suffering from cancer at that time.”

He said he was impressed “by how spirited she was and how Spirit-filled she was.”

