

Archbishop's new pastoral reflection acknowledges history of slavery and racism

Archbishop William E. Lori released Jan. 21 his second pastoral reflection in 12 months on the effects of racism on society. "The Journey to Racial Justice: Repentance, Healing and Action" was released by the archbishop at St. Bernardine Parish in West Baltimore on the day that commemorates the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The archbishop's reflection comes on the heels of the U.S. bishops' second pastoral letter against racism - "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love" - approved in November, and acknowledges the local church's history of enslavement of persons and other racial inequities.

The reflection also follows another from Archbishop Lori released Feb. 14, 2018, **"The Enduring Power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Principles of Nonviolence."**

In his new pastoral reflection, the archbishop noted the recurrence of racial and ethnic violence and hatred in ways that have not been seen in decades.

"Whether racism manifests itself in these blatant offenses against the dignity and humanity of people of color, or more subtly in the systemic racial inequities that persist in our current society - in the criminal justice system, in employment, education, housing, healthcare and political enfranchisement - the national conversation confirms that there is still a great deal of work to be done," Archbishop Lori said.

His pastoral acknowledges that churches and members of the clergy, including four archbishops of Baltimore, held enslaved persons.

"Records show that lay members, religious communities and individual clergy held enslaved persons and that the church benefited from their labor not only in general

parish work – the maintenance of churches, residences, convents, cemeteries, and so on – but also from the profit of their labor on plantations and farms owned by church entities,” the archbishop wrote.

The pastoral notes that even after the end of slavery, “the Church continued to fall short of its professed adherence to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Catholic schools, religious education classes, lay associations, and social services, including hospitals and orphanages, were segregated.”

Skipp Sanders, former executive director of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African-American History and Culture and a parishioner of St. Vincent de Paul in Baltimore, assisted the archdiocese with the drafting of the pastoral.

“I think that by and large people in our country don’t have an accurate understanding of African-American history and the history of this country, therefore, since we’re integrally a part of it,” he said. “It’s part of the corrective that needs to be given and especially, in light of what’s going on in current times, where in a sense the social fabric of the country is even being stretched to the tearing point.”

Sanders added, “Maybe for the first time in this corrective, we’re seeing people admit the role that all the major institutions in the country have played in assisting racism to persist. It may not have always been intentional; often it was. ... That’s a great admission when people are able to really begin to see that and admit that. And for the church to do it, because the church was involved too, I think is a big step forward.”

In an interview before the release of the pastoral, Archbishop Lori said grappling with the sins of racism in the church’s past opens up “the possibility of moving ahead in a healthier and more just manner – in a manner that is profoundly in accord with the Gospel.”

The pastoral notes that the church cannot become complacent in its efforts to fight racial injustice. “Have we lapsed, like our society at large, into a situation of de facto segregation? If we can still easily identify the ‘black’ and ‘white’ parishes of our archdiocese, have we truly accomplished the goal of racial equity we claim to embrace?” the document asks.

The pastoral reflection includes concrete steps to be taken by the archdiocese, including: organizing training and resources to discuss and address the issue of racism; examining the diversity of archdiocesan institutions, parishes, schools and social service programs, and enhancing efforts to further diversify where needed; and strengthening existing efforts to attract new members of the church and candidates for priesthood and religious life from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Archbishop Lori told the Review the action steps will help the archdiocese respond more intentionally in archdiocesan, parish and local ministries, “as well as ways in which we must advocate more courageously in the culture at large.”

Sanders said he appreciates the archbishop’s candor in writing the pastoral reflection, noting that it reminds him of the caliber of Cardinal Lawrence J. Shehan, who was archbishop of Baltimore, 1961-74.

“He (Archbishop Lori) is stepping forward and stepping out. I’m not sure that everything he says will be easily palatable to maybe some Catholics. But the fact that he’s doing it and he’s taking this leadership position, I really commend,” Sanders said.

Danielle Brown, associate director to the USCCB Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, said she would have “nothing but praise for local anti-racism statements.”

“The Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, in keeping with the message of the pastoral letter, ‘Open Wide Our Hearts,’ would likely encourage bishops to take up the same type of initiative as Archbishop Lori has in the issuing of this new statement,” Brown said.

She noted that it could also be very helpful if bishops were able to identify people with a heart for this work at the diocesan level to lead efforts against racism as he has.

“Still, the faithful must understand that this anti-racism work will not succeed without their individual efforts and their being lit up by the fire of justice,” Brown

said.

“The lay faithful should be encouraged and called on by any affirmation of their local bishops in their anti-racism efforts, particularly in Baltimore, where things have been racial volatile, but they do not have to wait to be agents of racial healing,” she said. “No individual effort is too small for God to work through in big ways.”

For the full text of the pastoral reflection, visit bitly.com/racismpastoral19