

Catholic Review Column: After Charleston, Still Much Work to Be Done

“Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church.” These words were included in the 1979 pastoral letter of the U.S. Catholic bishops, “Brothers and Sisters to Us.” Sadly, they remain relevant and true some 36 years later. In that letter, the U.S. bishops named racial prejudice as a grave sin that denies the truth and meaning of the Incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ and called for decisive action to end racism. Much has been done, but not enough.

Last week’s tragic shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., is the latest and most violent reminder that the disease of racism continues to erode the soul of our nation.

Louisville Archbishop Joseph Kurtz, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a statement on the murders of the Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney and eight members of his congregation, quoted the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter on racism: “Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.”

Here in our own archdiocese, the unrest in Baltimore this past April prompted a civic introspection that revealed that decades-old problems continue to undermine the human dignity of too many of our fellow citizens, problems that lead to the kind of reactions seen in the wake of the deaths of Freddie Gray Jr. here and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo.

In his statement on race relations prior to the start of the recent Spring General Assembly of Catholic Bishops in St. Louis earlier this month, Archbishop Kurtz noted, “A violent, sorrowful history of racial injustice, accompanied by a lack of educational, employment and housing opportunities, has destroyed communities and

broken down families, especially those who live in distressed urban communities.”

Through its presence in such communities, the Catholic Church is doing much to address such lack of opportunities.

Here in our archdiocese, much work is being done by our parishes, Catholic schools and institutions of charity and healthcare. But we can do more and we need to do more. That is why I have invited leaders from Catholic institutions serving in Baltimore to meet next month to discuss ways in which we coordinate our resources to better address critical areas of need in the poorest parts of our city, beginning with the community of Sandtown-Winchester. And we continue to engage our interfaith and ecumenical partners, as well as leaders in the public and private sector, as we seek to work together for the good of those we serve.

In his address in St. Louis, Archbishop Kurtz also offered five concrete ways in which the Catholic community can commit to ending racism and promoting peace, justice and respect for all persons:

- Pray for peace and healing among all people.
- Study the word of God and the social teaching of the church in order to gain a deeper appreciation of the dignity of all persons.
- Make a sincere effort to encounter more fully people of different racial backgrounds with whom we live, work and minister.
- Pursue ways in which Catholic parishes and neighborhoods can be truly welcoming of families of different racial and religious backgrounds.
- Get to know our local law enforcement officers. Let them know of our support and gratitude. And encourage young people to respect all legitimate authority.

These are things we can and should be doing and should serve as a guide for our discussions with family members, parishioners and others in the community. Let us pray about and discuss our role as individual Catholics and as an archdiocese in promoting justice for all people. The time is long overdue for racism to end in our society. We need to come together to work for peace and reconciliation, the only path forward for a nation wounded by the evil and division of racism.