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ANTI-RACISM, XENOPHOBIA AND DISCRIMINATION  
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**Contribution by the Delegation of the Holy See**

**Racism: an Open Wound in Humanity's Side. The Position of the Catholic Church**

In presenting the teaching of the Catholic Church on racism, I believe it is useful to utilize the document *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 1988.

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, at that time President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in presenting the document to journalists (10 February 1989), used the image of the Hydra in referring to racism in the modern world. This document was born of the awareness of the gravity and complexity of a multifaceted phenomenon, which is unfortunately, still present in the world of today. Its purpose is to offer elements of reflection and criteria for discernment to the commitment of Christians in the battle against racism and racial discrimination.

This document is divided into four parts. The first part, entitled «Racist Behaviour Throughout History», presents a quick overview of certain attitudes concerning the racial question and emphasizes how the Church's teaching has provided, in the context of the problems that have arisen in this area, consistent guidelines with principles drawn from the Gospel. In the Church's experience, there have been two crucial moments for the application of such guidelines. The first was «the discovery of the New World» (a notion, we may add incidentally, hotly disputed in some circles because of its Euro-centric presumption), following which the indigenous peoples became the object of «a brutal enslavement» (No. 3), for which justification was sought by these peoples' supposed inferiority. This was the first step towards the shameful African slave trade and onwards to the formulation of veritable racist theories. Pope Paul III made an intervention against such developments in relationships with autochthonous peoples in his Bull *Sublimis Deus* (2 June

1537), and in the Americas themselves missionaries raised their voices (among those cited is Bishop Bartolomé de Las Casas), filled with concern for the dignity of the indigenous peoples. At the same time, certain Spanish jurists and theologians (among whom are recalled the two great figures of Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez) deepened doctrinal understanding with the development of the concept of the fundamental equality of all men and all peoples. In this context, the document clearly admits that the behaviour of Christians was not always in line with the values of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.

The second crucial moment came about in the eighteenth century, when an openly racist mind-set began to assert itself. This mentality found widespread acceptance in the national-socialist ideology and led the Hitler regime to become responsible for «one of the greatest genocides in history» (No. 7). Nor was there lacking in this dramatic moment of history a clear teaching on the part of the Church, particularly in Pope Pius XI's Encyclical *Mit brennender Sorge* (1937), deliberately written in German language, as well as in the shining example of certain courageous Christians in Germany itself.

The second part of the document deals with «Forms of Racism Today», beginning with the infamous system of *apartheid*, «an extreme case of a vision of racial inequality» (No. 9). In this regard, emphasis is placed on the urgent need to overcome these intolerable situations, in order to avoid bloody conflicts and the occurrence of opposing racist reactions in the victims of discrimination, which are equally unacceptable. Two specific manifestations of racially-based discrimination are then listed: that directed towards aboriginal peoples, for whom is claimed the «right to maintain their identity» (No. 10), and that directed towards religious minorities, whose members are considered «second-class citizens» (No. 11) by the majority population that professes a different religion. Explicit and relevant mention is then made of those countries in which the civil effects of Islamic law are imposed even on those who are not Muslim. Reference is made, moreover, to different attitudes marked by discrimination: ethnocentrism, taken sometimes to the extreme of «ethnocide», by which a people's cultural dignity is denied (cfr. No. 12); social racism, on the basis of which the rights of certain classes of citizens are ignored, in order that the dominating classes will not lose their positions of privilege (cfr. No. 13);

xenophobia, directed especially against foreigners belonging to a different ethnic group, and which is translated into «the ostracism and the harassment of which refugees and immigrants are too often the object» (No. 14).

Moreover, particular mention is made of anti-Semitism, defined as «the most tragic form that racist ideology has assumed in our century, with the horrors of the Jewish ‘holocaust’» (No. 15). Reference is then made to the disquieting possibility of using techniques of artificial procreation for the purposes of racism, with the danger of a resurgence of «the deadly myth of eugenic racism, the misdeeds of which the world has already experienced» (No. 16).

The third part, under the title «The Dignity of Every Race and the Unity of Humankind: the Christian Vision», is more doctrinal in character and aims at giving a summary of the principles that inspire the Church’s teaching in this area.

The creation of man and woman «in the likeness of God» and their redemption by Christ constitute the foundation upon which the Church bases her affirmation of the equal dignity of every human person and all peoples. There is a correspondence between the reasoning of faith and that of science: the document cites the declaration in which a group of experts, meeting at UNESCO in 1951, maintains that «all human persons living today belong to the same species, *homo sapiens*, and that they descended from one same stock» (No. 18).

For Christians, the mystery of the Incarnation «shows in what esteem God held human nature since, in his Son, he wanted to unite it to his own nature without any confusion or separation. In a certain way, Christ has united himself with each person» (No. 21). The Church «has the sublime vocation of realizing, first of all within herself, the unity of humankind over and above any ethnic, cultural, national, social or other divisions in order to signify precisely that such divisions are now obsolete, having been abolished by the cross of Christ» (No. 22).

All Christians are called to bear witness to their faith by their actions: in their rejection of every discrimination, society will come to understand the value of the proclamation of the Gospel, in the eschatological perspective of the Kingdom of God.

The criteria that guide authentic Christian behaviour towards one’s neighbour are

three: respect for differences; brotherhood; solidarity. The equal dignity of every human person does not however imply uniformity in the way human beings are viewed: «it is important to recognize the diversity and complementarity of one another's cultural riches and moral qualities» (No. 23).

From respect, it is good to move to fraternal relationships, that is, living in charity in accordance with the second commandment given by Christ: «You shall love your neighbour as yourself».

Finally, it is necessary that one open oneself to a wide-reaching solidarity, above all towards those who are in need, even if they are far removed from us, as Pope John Paul II has repeatedly exhorted, particularly in his Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.

The last part of the document is rather pastoral in nature, and seeks to indicate possible paths for building a more fraternal world: «Contribution of Christians, in Union with Others, to Promoting Fraternity and Solidarity amongst Races».

As the point of departure, an observation is made: «Racial prejudice, which denies the equal dignity of all the members of the human family and blasphemes the Creator, can only be eradicated by going to its roots, where it is formed: in the human heart» (No. 24).

The Church seeks to foster such a conversion above all with the correct and complete presentation of her doctrine. This educational work must not be separated from a concrete witness of life: unfortunately, «Christians themselves must humbly admit that members of the Church, on all levels, have not always lived out this teaching coherently throughout history» (No. 25). While recognizing that «doctrine and examples themselves are not sufficient» and that «the victims of racism, wherever they may be, must be defended» (No. 26), the document invites Christians to adopt non-violent means in their commitment to this struggle.

The role of education and schools is emphatically underlined. There is also an insistence on the importance of appropriate juridical measures, especially on behalf of ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities, and on behalf of certain categories of persons whose conditions are precarious, such as immigrants, refugees and foreign workers. Moreover, the affirmation is made that, on the international level, «it is important to draw up juridical instruments to overcome racism and, above all, to make them fully effective» (No.

30). The International Convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination is explicitly cited, and the reader is reminded that the Holy See saw fit both to ratify this important instrument, which it did on 1 May 1969, and to take part in the various initiatives undertaken by the United Nations in the context of the «Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination» (1973-83).

The Church's contribution in this area is not exhausted by the Holy See's activity in the international community. The pastoral activity of the different particular Churches must also be taken into due account. In this regard, a significant example is given in «the efforts made by the bishops of two countries which have experienced the problems of racism in a particularly acute, if albeit, different way» (No. 31): the United States of America and South Africa.

Lastly, the risk of armed conflict brought about by the pursuit of racist policies is pointed out. It is also recognized that international law provides for the possibility of interventions against those States that practice racial discrimination, allowing «appropriate external pressure to be exercised in their regard, to lead them, according to an organic and negotiated plan, to abolish racist legislation» (No. 32).

The document concludes with the hope that racial injustice will be constructively eliminated without recourse to violence. It points out that such an objective is part of the Church's specific mission, exhorting Catholics to become ever more involved in such action together with other Christians and those who share the same respect for the human person: «The Church wants first and foremost to change racist attitudes, including those within her own communities ... Despite the sinful limitations of her members, yesterday and today, she is aware of having been constituted a witness to Christ's charity on earth, a sign and instrument of the unity of humankind. The message she proposes to everyone, and which she tries to live, is: 'Every person is my brother or sister'» (No. 33).

The document that I am presenting was republished on the occasion of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban (South Africa) in September 2001. This second edition features an «Introductory Update» (I.U.) that takes into account the developments of the problem that

have occurred since the publication of first edition.

We are living today in an era marked by an ever-accelerating *globalization*: countries, economies, cultures and life-styles are growing closer, more universal and indistinguishable. The phenomenon of interdependence is found in every area: politics, economics, finances, social and cultural life. Scientific discoveries and the development of communication technology have considerably «shrunk» the planet (cf. I.U., No. 2).

At the same time, and paradoxically, contrasts are growing more tense, ethnic violence is increasing, the search for a group identity, or ethnic or national identity, is becoming aggravated by the rejection of others, of those who are different, even to the point of committing barbarous acts. Thus the previous decade witnessed ethnic wars that became the cause of growing concern for years to come. This is a recognized paradox, which can be explained in part by the very fact that people fear losing their identity in a world which is too quickly becoming global, while the inequalities are increasing (cf. I.U., No. 3).

During this same decade, amidst the rising tension, the situation with regard to racism has unfortunately not improved, it has perhaps grown worse, even though the movement of peoples has not ceased to increase and the mixing of cultures and the phenomenon of multi-ethnicity have become «social facts». Indeed, if it is proper to rejoice at the end of the *apartheid* regime in South Africa, and especially because it ended, in a quite miraculous way, without a bloody conflict, the racist massacres or the «ethnic cleansing» committed these last few years show to what extent hatred and the desire to dominate others, often in a context of wholesale destruction, can take hold of man. Other situations that seriously call into question the concept of the equal dignity of every human person continue to be seen. Thus, for example, although slavery may have been legally abolished everywhere, it is still known that the practice of slavery persists, in Africa particularly among groups of different ethnic origins, and elsewhere under the new forms of human trafficking (children, women and illegal immigrants). Censure is likewise due to the insidious persistence of anti-Jewish prejudices, which was at the origin of the Holocaust during the last century. A century, we cannot fail to recall, that began with the genocide of the Armenians in Turkey and ended with that of the Tutsis in Rwanda (cf. I.U., No. 4).

In this context, we can ask what *specific role the Church* is called to play.

An essential first response is that it is in *the human heart* that murder, wickedness, envy, pride and recklessness find their source (cf. *Mk 7:21*), and it is therefore at that level that the contribution of the Church, through her constant call for personal conversion, is most important and irreplaceable. In the last few years, for example, we have seen increasing and more effective penalties applied for racist attitudes and behaviour within States, but also at the international level particularly by means of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and that for Rwanda. Such penalties are necessary and important in order to punish the perpetrators of these acts and to provide a collective manifestation of the fundamental values without which a society cannot endure. But they remain largely insufficient and are a measure of last resort. For we must speak in the first place and above all to the human heart, in order that there will prevail neither fear nor the spirit of domination but openness to others and sentiments of brotherhood: hence, the fundamental role of religions. Christians, in particular, have the responsibility to act in a consistent way with their faith, which teaches the dignity of every human being and the unity of the human race. And should war or calamitous circumstances make others our enemies, the first Christian commandment — and the most radical — is precisely that of love of one's enemies: we are called to respond to evil with good (cf. I.U., No. 5).

Christians, therefore, should not have intents or attitudes that are racist or discriminatory, however that is unfortunately not always the case in practice and has not always been the case in history. In this regard, during the Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pope John Paul II stressed the need to *ask for forgiveness*, repeatedly doing so himself in the name of the Church, so that Her memory might be purified of all the «forms of counter-witness and scandal» (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, No. 33) that took place during the past. In certain situations, in fact, it happens that evil outlives its perpetrators, through consequences of behaviour that continues beyond them, and these situations can become a heavy burden on the conscience of future generations. A *purification of memory* therefore becomes necessary: «Purifying the memory means eliminating from personal and collective conscience all forms of resentment or violence left by the inheritance of the past, on the basis of a new and rigorous historical-theological judgment, which becomes the foundation for a renewed moral way of acting. This occurs

whenever it becomes possible to attribute past historical deeds a different quality, having a new and different effect on the present, in view of progress in reconciliation in truth, justice and charity among human beings and, in particular, between the Church and the different religious, cultural and civil communities with whom she is related» (International Theological Commission, *Memory and Reconciliation: the Church and the Faults of the Past*, 2000, No. 5.1; cf. I.U., No. 6).

It is thus, for example, that on 12 March 2000 the Pope celebrated a Solemn Mass in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, during which special prayers were offered and forgiveness sought for past failings. Among the particular intentions presented, we can recall those concerning the wrongs committed against the people of Israel as well as acts of discrimination, marginalization or exclusion, and actions against the rights of peoples and the respect for cultures and religions (cf. I.U., No. 7).

Asking for forgiveness concerns first of all the life of the Church, but, as the Pope remarked, «we may rightly hope that political leaders and peoples, especially those involved in tragic conflicts fueled by hatred and the memory of often ancient wounds, will be guided by the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation exemplified by the Church and will make every effort to resolve their differences through open and honest dialogue» (John Paul II, Address to participants in the International Symposium on the Inquisition, 31 October 1998, No. 5).

Reconciliation calls for sincere forgiveness among people, without which no peace process can ever be undertaken or confirmed. If the Church is aware of the difficulty, of the «foolishness» of this forgiveness, it is not for her a sign of weakness or cowardice, quite the contrary: she preaches forgiveness prompted solely by her unwavering confidence in God's infinite forgiveness (cf. I.U., No. 8). She makes concrete suggestions for achieving reconciliation, which must be brought about on every level. It is necessary first of all to overcome the burdensome weight of history, with its long procession of resentment, fears, suspicions between families, ethnic groups and peoples: for we cannot remain prisoners to the past. This necessary purification of memory will, among other things, involve a correct re-reading of each other's history (at the level of pedagogy, culture, etc.) while refraining from making summary or partial judgments, so as to arrive at a better understanding, and

therefore acceptance, of the other (cf. I.U., No. 9).

This reconciliation will not be possible unless the different religions, governments and the international community make an honest and active choice in favour of the «culture of peace», so that, in particular, recourse to arms will no longer be a method used to deal with problems (cf. I.U., No. 10).

Forgiveness, which is an act of love, has certain requirements: the wrong that has been done must be recognized and, insofar as possible, reparation must be made. The first of these requirements is therefore respect for *the truth*. Lies, unfairness, corruption, ideological or political manipulation make it in effect impossible to create peaceful social relationships. Hence, the importance of procedures that permit truth to be ascertained, procedures that are necessary but difficult, since the search for truth runs the risk of turning into thirst for revenge. To the need for truth is added another requirement, *justice*: «forgiveness neither eliminates nor lessens the need for the reparation which justice requires, but seeks to reintegrate individuals and groups into society, and States into the community of Nations» ( John Paul II, *Message for the 1997 World Day of Peace* , No. 5; cf. I.U., No. 11).

Here we must emphasize the importance of educating on human rights, which can be fostered through the efforts of organized religion. The international community is aware that the roots of racism, discrimination and intolerance are found in prejudicial attitudes and ignorance, the results of sin above all, but also in a faulty and inadequate *education* (cf. I.U., No. 13).

In this context, I would like to mention Pope John Paul II's initiative inviting religious leaders to Assisi to pray for peace in the world, which took place on 24 January 2002. At the conclusion of this Day of Prayer for Peace, the participants accepted a series of commitments grouped under the title «The Decalogue of Assisi». The second of the ten commitments reads: «We commit ourselves to educating people to mutual respect and esteem, in order to help bring about a peaceful and fraternal coexistence between people of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions».

Finally, we may note that since 1988, two great world divides have grown larger: the first, which is always the more dramatic, is that of *poverty* and social discrimination; the

second, which is newer and less publicized, is that concerning the *unborn human being*, which is made the object of experiments and manipulations (through techniques of artificial procreation, through the use of «surplus embryos», through so-called therapeutic cloning, etc.). The risks of an heretofore unknown form of racism is quite real, since the development of these techniques could result in the creation of a «subcategory of human beings» essentially destined to the comfort of others: a new and terrible form of slavery. There are in fact powerful commercial interests that would like to exploit this latent temptation to eugenics. Therefore, governments and the scientific community must remain extremely vigilant (cf. I.U., No. 21).

In September 1995, while visiting South Africa, Pope John Paul II remarked: «*Solidarity ... is the only path forward, out of the complete moral bankruptcy of racial prejudice and ethnic animosity*» (Homily in Germiston, 17 September 1995, No. 4). This is a solidarity to be developed among States but also within all societies where the dehumanization and disintegration of the social fabric leads without fail to the exacerbation of racist and xenophobic opinions and behaviour, to the rejection of those who are weaker, whether they be foreigners, the handicapped or the homeless. This is a solidarity that is founded on the unity of the human family, since all people created in the image and likeness of God have the same origin and are called to the same destiny. And this is why the contribution of Christianity remains irreplaceable, a contribution to be made by all believers who, freely holding fast to their faith, live it in their daily lives, in the knowledge that freedom of conscience and of religion remain the prerequisite, principle and heart of every other freedom, both human and civil, both individual and community (cf. I.U., No. 22).

I would like to conclude by quoting a passage that is found in the closing section of the first edition of the document *The Church and Racism*: «Racism still exists and continually reappears in different forms. It is a wound in humanity's side that mysteriously remains open. Everyone, therefore, must make efforts to heal it with great firmness and patience» (No. 33).

I believe that the meeting in which we are taking part constitutes an important step on this path of healing, which is slow — alas too slow — and painful. Let us not grow weary of following this path, even if our steps are small, looking always towards the future, of course,

but without forgetting the past.

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