

## The Ghost of the Legacy of Racial Inequality Continues to Haunt Us

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The ghosts of our legacy of racial inequality continue to haunt us and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s holiday calls for a renewed commitment to racial equality as a national goal and priority.

Dr. King lamented that during his life most white Americans were not sincerely committed to genuine equality but to mere "improvement." He observed a fundamental ambivalence whereby the white majority wants to condemn blatant acts of injustice and yet preserve their position of social dominance. He concluded that the majority of the dominant culture is suspended between two opposing attitudes: "They are uneasy with injustice, but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it."

King's insights resonate with the conviction of many today that while laws have been changed and many racial barriers have been removed, racism is still a lingering social cancer that pervades much of society. King's holiday is a call for a new commitment to the project of genuine racial equality. Racism is still not a relic of the past.

Pope John Paul II stated that the beginning of the millennium was a time to put an end to every form of racism, a plague which is still one of the most persistent and destructive evil of nations.

Racism and poverty, which often is linked to racism, continue to undermine our nation's most basic promise of liberty and justice for all. Even as we remember the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his assassination, Dr. King's aspiration for America, "a dream of a land where men and women of all races, of all nationalities and all creeds can live together as brothers and sisters", remains a dream as yet unfulfilled.

As believers in God, we approach social issues from a faith perspective grounded in a concern for human dignity and full human flourishing. The heart of the race question is moral and religious, and is overcome by a change, conversion of heart. The existence of racial intolerance and discrimination is not only a social injustice but racism is absolutely irreconcilable with Christian faith and belief as it mocks the God-given equal dignity granted to all human beings. Racism fractures the unity of the human family.

Few issues engage us so emotionally and viscerally as the issue of racism. We can also feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the challenge of racism and embarrassed by our ignorance and lack of understanding of it. What motivates our concern about racism is our faith conviction that this is a "radical evil" which is not only absolutely incompatible with Christian faith and belief but also a threat to our nation's future. A new way of

understanding what it means to be American and who is included in that self-understanding is urgently needed for both the integrity of our faith and our survival as a nation.

Racial injustice and poverty, moral scandals that are deeply intertwined, are the results of human agency. They need not exist. This means that social reality can be other than the way it is. Social life is created by human beings, by human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change it by changing attitudes, behaviors, patterns and structures, and therein lies the hope for the beginning of a new dialogue of how we should all live and work together as sisters and brothers of the one human family. The U.S. Catholic Bishops in their letter on racism remind us: “There must be no turning back along the road of justice, no sighing for bygone times of privilege, no nostalgia for simple solutions from another age. For we are children of the age to come, when the first shall be last and the last first, when blessed are they who serve Christ the Lord in all his brothers and sisters, especially those who are poor and suffer injustice.”