



Dialogue to foster conversion of hearts is the goal of the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, said the group's chairman in his first address to the bishops' conference Monday.

"Our faith gives us confidence that Christ wishes to break down the walls created by the evils of racism. He wants us utilize us as his instruments in this great work," said George V. Murry, SJ of Youngstown, Ohio.

This call is embedded in the Gospel message, he said, as we respond to those who even today continue to suffer from racism in the United States.

Bishop Murry spoke at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' fall general meeting, held Nov. 13-14 in Baltimore.

He gave an update on the conference's Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, which he leads.

The committee was established in late August, after white supremacists and neo-Nazi rallied in Charlottesville, Va., and a 20 year-old man drove a car into the counter-protest, killing one and injuring 19.

The creation of the committee – the highest form of response that the conference can authorize – builds on other efforts by the bishops to fight racism in recent years, including a task force to explore the issue both inside and outside the Church, and a pastoral letter on racism, which is currently in the drafting process.

While racism is not unique to the United States, it is important to recognize the historical context that has led to this particular moment, Bishop Murry said, pointing the country's history of slavery, the Civil War, and the progress made in the Civil Rights Movement.

"Even with that progress, one does not need to look very far to see that racism still exists and has found a troubling resurgence in recent years."

For decades, the Catholic Church has been working to respond to the problem of racism, he said.

At times, some Catholic leaders have been part of the problem, failing to live up to Church teaching, and “this must be recognized and frankly acknowledged,” he said.

However, it is also important to recognize the contribution of many Catholics over the years fighting for racial equality and justice, he said.

So far, the ad hoc committee’s work has included a press conference last month at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the creation of resources for the Sept. 9 Feast Day of St. Peter Claver as an annual day of prayer for peace within communities.

The committee is also working on plans for a national convocation early next year, as well as a series of listening sessions and dialogues across the country, which Murry described as key to the group’s work.

These listening sessions, he said, will seek to “hear the voices of people suffering as a result of racism,” explore the causes and effects of racism in the United States.

Looking forward, the committee will also be working to promote education, resources, communications strategies, public policy advocacy and care for victims.

Bishop Murry emphasized the importance of the committee’s work.

“Some people think that there is no need to confront racism, or that we should confront it only in private,” he said.

However, he continued, “to confront racism is essential – in fact, necessary – because the Gospel calls us to work for justice, and racism denies just to people simply because of their race.”

And public displays of racism – such as those seen in Charlottesville in August – require a public response, from society and from the Church, he said.

In a discussion following Murry’s presentation, the bishops shared their observations and experiences of working to fight racism.

Several bishops noted the need for symbolic actions, which can be powerful in changing minds and hearts.

They observed the intersection of social class and racial divisions, as well as the need to understand how racist ideas are spread, particularly on social media and among young

people.

Addressing the question of whether racist speech is constitutionally protected, Bishop Murry suggested that the question is ultimately one of people's desires, rather than legality.

The goal is conversion, he said, changing hearts so that people do not want to say racist things, even if doing so would be protected under the Constitution.

Protecting free speech is critical, added Archbishop Thomas Rodi of Mobile, Ala., because some people who object to the teachings of the Catholic Church accuse the bishops of "hate speech."

While racism is a topic that many people find uncomfortable, the problem will only be overcome if opportunities are created for discussions to take place, the bishops observed.

Bishop Robert Baker of Birmingham, Ala., stressed the importance of the personal involvement of the bishops in fighting the scourge of racism. He said that he has found great success in leading listening sessions in his diocese, and has found a strong level of receptivity from his people.

Bishop Baker also stressed that people are open to addressing the issue, and that this is the "prime time" to do so, in a way that would not have been possible 50 or even 20 years ago.

The next challenge, Archbishop Rodi suggested, is finding a way to reach more people, since those who are willing to attend listening sessions are likely already willing to dialogue on the issue.

Archbishop Wilton Daniel Gregory of Atlanta emphasized that the fight against racism must be viewed as a long-term battle.

Hearts and minds will not be changed overnight, he said. However, the ad hoc committee raises the issue to the level of attention it merits and allows the bishops to offer a more comprehensive response.

Throughout the decades, Gregory said, the U.S. bishops have issued statements at key moments, including the 1957 Little Rock School Desegregation, the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the 1979 pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us*.

While these statements have allowed the bishops to take an important stand in reaffirming Catholic teaching, the creation of the ad hoc committee will allow the conference to do more than just speak, he said.

He compared racism to abortion, saying that both issues require active involvement in efforts to evangelize, catechize, and educate in order to change minds and hearts.

“Racism is never going to be conquered by speech,” he said, “but only by actions.”

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