

Situating racism (August 20, 2017)

A bishop's main role is teaching. Good teachers know that definitions are shaped by time and place. In the present, we are aware of some disturbances symbolized by short-sighted policing. Monuments to the Confederacy are still flashpoints in civic discussions. Closer yet, the 1908 obelisk that marks the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe records "American" deaths at 32, "Indians" unknown.

Navigating the present requires a map that goes beyond our borders and our decade. Catholic social teaching guides us from a historical height and horizon that guide the course of our commitments.

The basic definition of racism comes in two parts. First, a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. Second, racial prejudice or discrimination. (Merriam Webster Collegiate, 10th Ed.)

On that second part, I recently heard an activist say that no one is trying to deny anyone's internal thoughts. But, he continued, no one has a right to act publicly to injure another's dignity, hurt their property or limit their rightful opportunities.

Social scientists today tell us that "race" is an artificial category. It does not feel artificial to many who want better schooling for their children. It is not imaginary to the Asian, black and Hispanic comedians who cleverly unmask stereotypes inside and outside their communities. It has an honored part in the lessons of "Sesame Street." I have always sympathized with playwright David Mamet's observation that race is the defining American issue. It is intertwined with so many of our social challenges.

As Catholics, it is our duty to work for — not just believe in — the dignity of other human beings. Dignity, worth, should be our first attribution rather than expecting people to earn our respect. This is the godly attitude: Christ died for us even though we were sinners (Romans 5:8). We are called to a generous heart because God continues to be generous through no merit of our own.

Catholic social teaching is less well-known among us than it ought to be. It reflects our biblical theology, Christian anthropology, and something called natural law philosophy. In our impatience, we strive to solve individual issues without seeing how they are tied to many others. The larger viewpoint allows for more durable responses to social ills, and helps to prevent others.

Catholic educational institutions treat race and rights issues in an ongoing way. Now and then a major document surfaces. For example, the U.S. bishops' 1979 pastoral letter "Brothers and Sisters To Us" remains instructive. Another statement is slow in coming because of the complexity of the global situation. Wars, disease, economic disparities and vast migrations of

people have intertwined. But teaching about basic human dignity has not ceased in our schools and social ministries.

We hold that parents are the first and best teachers for their own children. This produces two parallel obligations. The first is to help our children value human lives, even those that look and sound different than us. Good example is key. The second is to avoid bad example or to let ill-treatment go unremarked. Silence is approval. I recall that some of my strongest childhood learnings came in fleeting one-time lessons — an adult's joke, a cynical comment at a public park, the use of a word reserved for another person's physical origins or way of speaking. Some formative lessons stick with one occurrence. Some with repetition.

So in this short space, let it be known that, in matters related to race and ethnic origin, we owe it to each other to do good and to avoid evil. If we are not doing one, we are failing the other as well. The same goes for the discipleship balance of spiritual and social advocacies.

They are not separable: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31).