

The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus Statement on Racism: A Sankofa Observance of the 500th Anniversary of the First Enslaved African to Enter the Western Hemisphere (1501-2001)

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INTRODUCTION

We take this historical moment in the history of humankind to challenge ourselves, all people of goodwill, the Roman Catholic Church and all those with a Christian conscience to examine the issue of racism in our lives, society and globalized civilization. This year, 2001 marks the 500th anniversary of the first African slave to be transported for labor in the New World in 1501 to the island of Hispaniola, present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic in the Caribbean. The unfolding event that began five hundred years ago changed the history of the world, and still is an agent for global change in many societies. This observance for Africans, African Americans, Afro-Latinos, Afro-Caribs and their friends provides a “Sankofa” moment. Sankofa is a Western African term that calls a person, or a people, to look back to their past for wisdom to discern their future. It is the purpose of this statement to share the Sankofa moment in order to reflect and challenge the Church, nation and global village in which we live today. This Sankofa moment requires that we gaze upon the reality of the history and journey of the African presence in America. This observance is accompanied by a sense of reverence for those who have been lost in the seas of forgetfulness, a determination to bear witness to the silent screams of slaves, and a renewed commitment to doing justice in our times for generations yet unborn.

The Portuguese began importing black Africans into the Iberian peninsula as slaves during the last two decades of the 15th century. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453 had closed down the Black Sea slave markets which had been the source for slaves in medieval Europe. As one noted historian remarks, “Turkish expansionism and Iberian commercial enterprise had served to transform the status of the African...to the single remaining source of cheap, alien servile labor.”¹

The Spanish at first enslaved the Indians of the New World, and full scale importation of Africans from Africa began in 1518. At first, the Spanish sought to transport only Afro-Spaniards, that is to say those who had been born in Spain and had been baptized Christians. The Governor of the Indies, Nicolas de Ovando, received permission from the crown to introduce his slave from Spain into Hispaniola on September 16, 1501.²

We reflect on this as we count off 500 years of racial dysfunction in this hemisphere, and the horrific history of social trauma for the more than 200 million³ people of African slave descent in North, South, Central America and the Caribbean. These continental divides collectively make up “America,” as referred to in this statement.

There are four areas of global racism to reflect upon in our Sankofa observance as we discern the directions to journey in faith in this new century and millennium. These areas challenge us all to make the experience of African and Native American genocide, slavery and social marginalization a focus for exploring the process of human redemption. The four areas of reflection and challenge are:

- Redemption in America and the story of Joseph in Genesis
- Repentance in America for the racial dysfunction of our New World history
- Reconciliation in America as the movement towards racial sobriety
- Restoration in America by discovery of the unity of the human family.

REDEMPTION

The Book of Genesis provides a biblical account of family betrayal, slavery and redemption. Genesis recounts the story of Joseph, and how his brothers sold him into slavery. Driven by jealousy and hate, his brothers profited from the caravan of Midianites on their way to Egypt by selling their brother, Joseph. The betrayed and enslaved brother was stripped of his fine clothes and sold for twenty pieces of silver. The slavery of the biblical world is a shared reality of untold millions today.

In 1501, five centuries ago, the first enslaved African arrived on the shores of the Western hemisphere to the island of Hispaniola, which today are the Republics of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. It was the beginning of a long travail, the inauguration of a brutal commerce that brought social disintegration and economic dislocation to Africa. It also inaugurated a social curse comprised of racial castes, racial hatred and racial injustice upon four continents (Europe, Africa, North and South America).

Slavery was not an innovation of the 16th century. The Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of the African peoples reached a new height in number and in cruelty because it was based on the concept of the essential inferiority and degradation of a continent and its peoples.

Pope John Paul II, in his visit to Mexico City exactly a year ago this month, in his exhortation, *Ecclesia in America* ⁴ (The Church in America), called for the attention of the societies in this hemisphere to the centuries old legacy of descendents of Native and African people. The intergenerational legacy of Native Americans and African Americans is one of continued oppression, slavery, genocide, and systematic marginalization throughout the New World republics. The Church acknowledges its role in this sad and sinful legacy. ⁵

Bartolome de Las Casas (1474-1566), a bishop, rightly called the ‘Father of Human Rights’ seeking to protect and preserve the Amerindian population from extermination-their brutal enslavement began at the time of Columbus’s arrival-suggested that Africans be substituted for the slave labor that was slowly destroying the indigenous peoples of the Americas. His plea came after the arrival of the first African slave. He lived to regret with bitterness his suggestion to enslave the Africans. He learned with chagrin that the fruits of slavery poisoned all levels of society, destroyed all the bonds of the human family, and violated the image of God in all his adopted daughters and sons. Las Casas lived to spend his life in fighting for justice for all people, for restitution and redemption for the sins of those who had profited unjustly from the labors of others, and for the essential unity of all God’s children. But the effort did not stem the global process of African labor for the American markets.

The Book of Genesis recounts the encounter between Joseph, ex-slave, and now the powerful agent of Pharaoh, and his brothers, who had sold him into slavery. Forced to confess, overcome with remorse, fearful of the consequences, the brothers sought forgiveness. Joseph replied to them that God had brought life from their act of destruction. God had brought good out of their evil; God had brought good out of their wickedness.

This sad anniversary marks for us a time of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. This anniver-

sary also marks for us an occasion for grace by embracing prayerful opportunities to seek, to discover, and to celebrate God's acts of redemption in our Sankofa observance.

Repentance in America

The hemisphere is called to repentance because of its grievous and heinous genocide in the human family. First, there are the sinful and savage actions which resulted in the genocidal elimination of the native populations. From the state of Alaska in North America to Tierra Del Fuego in South America, the native American population has been savagely abused, systematically marginalized and rendered powerless to assume their rights in these nations, or their autonomy within their reservations. The Native American communities that exist today survived genocide, forced migration, deliberate infection with deadly diseases and forced starvation and war campaigns.⁶ It is a sad commentary that of the 50 states in the United States, 27 have Native American names, but most citizens of these states would be hard pressed to locate the Native American population within their midst. America has much to repent for throughout the hemisphere.

In the country of Mexico, the Native population was 20 million in 1516 — — by 1580 — — there were only two million.⁷ The vanquished population was the result of death due to exposure to new diseases, enforced slavery, and military starvation strategies of the Spanish conquistadors. An example of the continuation of genocide against Native people is in Brazil where we read of the elimination of the Native American populations in the Amazon jungle by means of bombing villages to clear the way for commercial development.⁸ This genocide of clearing the Native population away is an attempt to circumvent the laws that allow the people to live protected from Western encroachment. This genocide continues the 500 years of taking life from the Native Americans for the support of white supremacy in the republics of the hemisphere. Does this not cry out for repentance?

RECONCILIATION IN AMERICA

The tragedy of slavery continues in America, not as a past event, but as a living legacy in the present. It has stamped a stigmata of inferiority upon the sons and daughters of Africa which endures today. This assumption of inferiority, living in the collective unconsciousness of white Americans and shared even by some people of color, has poisoned our public life, fragmented our communities, and compromised the common good. This anniversary, then, is a fitting occasion to examine and commit ourselves to the task of reconciliation: healing the historic divisions and endemic suspicions which make us "strangers and aliens" to each other.

In the Joseph story, the familial wounds of the past were able to be healed through an acknowledgement of the harm done by the brothers, a willingness to make amends to repair the harm done (symbolized by Reuben's offer to become Joseph's servant), and the establishment of equal, just, and inclusive relationships (e.g., Joseph's refusal of this offer and desire to relate as brother to his brothers).

This biblical narrative, the heritage of Catholic social teaching, and the sacramental practice of the Church, give us valuable insights as to the nature and demands of genuine racial reconciliation. First, genuine reconciliation must be grounded in a recognition of the depth of harm done. This runs counter to the prevailing tendency today to tell aggrieved parties to "get over it." In Catholic social thought, the State (i.e., the legitimate representatives of the people) bears a unique responsibility for the well-being of the common good. Therefore, genuine reconciliation demands of public authorities an honest admission and apology for the harms stemming from the events of slavery and their tragic ramifications. Public authorities must be the catalysts for what Pope John Paul has called a "purification of memory,"

the recollection of the past in order to acknowledge the harms it has caused in the present, in order to build a more just future.

Second, authentic reconciliation demands a willingness to make amends for the harms done to our social, cultural, political, and economic life by the events of African enslavement. This insight is as old as the sacrament of Reconciliation in the Church, which has always maintained that contrition and confession alone are insufficient. Rather, the penitent must also engage in acts of restitution which repair the damage caused by his/her sins. What the confessional practice enjoined on individuals has been affirmed in the social sphere by the U.S. Bishops when they declare, “Social harm calls for social relief.” (cf. Economic Justice for All)

Therefore, genuine reconciliation calls for all social institutions entrusted with the common good—civic organizations, hospitals, schools, labor and financial institutions, and government agencies—to undertake proactive efforts to overcome the racially based disadvantages that burden the sons and daughters of Africa. The often heard excuse, “But I/we didn’t do it,” is neutralized by the parable of the Good Samaritan, which teaches our responsibility for correcting unjust situations even if we ourselves did not cause them.

Finally, authentic racial healing, though it requires forming personal friendships and relationships with people of other races, cannot be accomplished through this means alone. Rather, the goal of racial reconciliation demands a thorough social transformation so that racial differences cease to be a basis for social hierarchy. It thus requires a never-ending personal, interpersonal, and communal struggle against the “default” assumption of racial inferiority.

The Christian community can facilitate this on-going conversion by creating annual liturgical rites and rituals which recall our racial brokenness, confess our need for redemption, and proclaim our belief in the power of God who frees us from our racial bondage. These rites and rituals can sustain us in the continual efforts to create and act out of a new consciousness. Perhaps the Jewish community’s annual observance of Yom Kippur might serve as a model for an annual communal commemoration of racial reconciliation among Christian believers.

RESTORATION IN AMERICA

Restoration in America will be the fruit of redemption, repentance and reconciliation. In the mystery of the human condition how would we go about the restoration of the millions of lives lost in genocidal actions towards the people of African and Native American descent? Restoration begins with telling their story. A history that sheds light on the dark side of the development of America, the underdevelopment of African and the Native populations of America. Restoration calls for building bridges of conversation on how we as a society have constructed a world of white supremacy, and a cultural civilization that values whiteness over all other hues of humanity. This conversation will shed light on the various responses from the White and Nonwhite communities that we need to consider. Consideration of the role of the Native American in building up European wealth and the wealth of the New World republics. And consideration of the role of the African and the continued wealth building of the republics of America.

Restoration will bring about connections. Today as people in United States society begin to search deeper into their family histories, it is becoming more common to hear of African Americans having family reunions with their White American cousins. They share the same forebearers, both the descendants of former slaves and descendants of the slave master. These occasions bring about new discoveries

about the real and true “family history” of America. This restoration is the renewal of the human family, and the American family in particular. In this family we find in the United States, a large percent of Black Americans have Native American ancestry.⁹ In the continental America (North, South, Central and the Caribbean) we find that tens of millions of Whites have African ancestry.¹⁰ We are a family that needs recovery from the trauma of racial dysfunction to restore our proper functioning as sisters and brothers to one another.

CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGE

We, as members of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus of the United States, find in the story of Joseph being sold into Egypt by his brothers a remarkable parable for the historical linkage between ourselves and our brothers and sisters in the Motherland, Africa. Just as the redemptive arc of the will of God had the brothers of Joseph find in him who was sold into slavery, a new hope of salvation for their father and their family, the African populations in America can likewise become a redemptive factor for Africa. Just as the Black American mobilization for the social revolution in South Africa made possible a vision, the seed of possibility of other efforts of liberation that reflect the redemptive process in global relationships can bear fruit.

As an organization in the New World, which is made up of descendents of African slaves with Native American, European, and Asian ancestry in our families, we reflect and we challenge all those of good will to participate in this Sankofa observance. This observance of the 500th anniversary of the first enslaved African arriving in this hemisphere is situated in an important timeline of Christian history, the first days of the third millennium of Christianity. Only one generation in 50 witness the change of a millennium. We are the generation of favored by time and circumstance to enter the first century of the new millennium. We honor this moment in our history as an African people, and as a Catholic people to create Sankofa events to witness to our providential place in salvation history and world history. In our historical Sankofa events we will reflect on the redemptive process in the history of racial enslavement, the call to heartfelt repentance and reconciliation between the people within the societies in which we live. We challenge one another, our Church, nation and global village to do the work of justice by the restoration of the unity and dignity of the human family, the family of God.

AFTERWARDS

Fidelity to the struggle for redemption, repentance, reconciliation and restoration is the challenge of every age and our age. Each member, family, faith expression, organization, civic institution in every nation is challenged to witness to a committed fidelity in restoring unity to the human family. The ideas and initiatives listed in the attached appendices to this statement are a beginning for a Sankofa observance of the 500th anniversary of the first enslaved African to enter into our hemisphere.

1 Frederick Bowser, *The African Slave in Colonial Peru, 1524-1650*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.) pp. 1-4.

2 Ibid., 354, footnote 6. See also J. E. Harris, “The African Diaspora in the Old and the New Worlds,” in *General History of Africa. Africa From the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. B.A. Ogot. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. UNESCO.) Vol 5: 113-136. See especially p. 114.

3 The number of present day descendents of the enslaved Africans is the result of totaling the number of African Americans in the United States which is 32 million, (source of core data is from the U.S. Census

Bureau, the year 2000); and Latin America with 150 million (by account of the publication, Quest for Inclusion: Realizing Afro-Latin American Potential (Washington, DC: Organization of Africans in the Americas.) p.16. In most countries of this hemisphere the African American populations are undercounted.

4 See, John Paul II, Ecclesia in America, section on “Discrimination against indigenous peoples and Americans of African descent,” section 64. (Mexico City January 22, 1999).

5 See, The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society (Report of the Vatican Pontifical Peace and Justice Commission). (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1989.)

6 See, S. Talbot, Roots of Oppression: The American Indian Question. (New York: International Publishers, 1981).

7 This reference to Mexico is not to single this country out. However, historically the Spanish were the first European power to conquer and vanquish the Native American population after the arrival of Columbus. See Colin A. Palmer, Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650 (Harvard University Press, 1976.) p. 2.

8 See, Cincinnati C.P.P.S. Newsletter, “Mission Views from the Xingu.” Interview with Bp. Erwin Kraeutler in 1986. p. 1904. Translated by Herbert Kramer.

9 See, William Katz, Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage. (Atheneum, NY: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986).

10 See for North America, Russell, K., Wilson, M., & Hall, R., The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992.); and for Latin South America see, Christopher Rodriguez, Latino Manifesto: A Critique of the Race Debate in the US Latino Community. (Columbia, Maryland: Cimarron Publishing, 1996.) especially, pp.132-38©

The National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, 2001

440 W. 36th Street, New York, NY 10018 Tel: (212) 868-1847

Fax: (212) 563-0878 E-MAIL: TNBCCC@AOL.COM

