



Shared here is a letter co-written by Cardinal Cupich and Bishop Horace E. Smith, M.D., senior pastor of Apostolic Faith Church. Published by the editorial board of the Chicago Tribune on September 28, 2020, [this commentary](#) is for all within our community to reflect and pray upon.

Systemic racism is real, and all Americans play a role in addressing it

It has been a summer of anguish for Black Americans. Six months after Breonna Taylor was shot to death by Louisville police officers in a botched drug raid, the nation is once again seized by grief, anger and despair over the spectacle of another young Black person killed by police — and no one has been indicted for her killing. After three days of deliberation, a Kentucky grand jury has charged one now-former police officer with recklessly endangering Taylor’s neighbors, even though she was the one who ended up dead.

We write on behalf of a group of pastors that also includes the Rev. Ira J. Acree, senior pastor of Greater St. John Bible Church; the Rev. Chris Harris, pastor of Bright Star Church Chicago; the Rev. Marshall Hatch, senior pastor of New Mount Pilgrim Baptist Church; and the Rev. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ.

As pastors who minister to Black families, brown families, Asian families and white families, we find ourselves once again faced with the horrifying question: Why does this keep happening, and what can we do about it? After we do our part to bind up the deep psychic wounds of our parishioners, neighbors, friends and family members, we are left asking, what now? Pray for peace, march for peace, work for peace — yes, peace. This is what Christians are supposed to be for, believing as we do in the Prince of Peace. And who could argue against it? In the face of wanton violence, we are called to take responsibility for building a culture of nonviolence.

But while peace may be necessary to the cause, it is insufficient, for creating a culture of peace requires something that ensures its endurance. That something is what we call justice.

Justice is a complex thing. It takes hard work. It requires systems of transparency, vigilance, fairness and accountability. It needs people who take stock of and resist systems of injustice. One of those is racism. We have heard from those who claim there is no such thing as systemic racism. We have been told that racism is something that perverts the hearts of individual women and men, and that in the absence of avowed racists — of which we still have not a small number in this country — there can be no racist system.

It can be comforting to people who have never experienced racial prejudice when they reflect on their lives and cannot identify times when they have behaved in racist ways. Look, some may say, at the strides our society has made since the era of institutionalized slavery. Yes, our Black brothers and sisters are no longer made to use different water fountains, explicitly barred from “Whites Only” shops, bought and sold as chattel — all instances of systemic injustice.

But our Christian faith demands more than an acknowledgment of gains. It requires that we make an examination of conscience, not simply of our own individual consciences, but collectively, as a nation. We are called to examine our various social and governmental systems and ask whether they are bearers of justice or its opposite.

We don't need to look back very far in Chicago's history to see one of the most notorious examples of systemic racism: contract buying, the practice of predatory home pricing and sales that undermined the ability of Black families to accrue wealth as white families could.

We cannot turn away from the church's own history, especially when it comes to mono-ethnic and mono-racial congregations. And we see other ways in which people of color are systemically disadvantaged: unemployment rates are much higher for people of color; the median wealth of white people is about 10 times what it is for Black people; quality and availability of education — by law — health care, transportation, even grocery stores are all much worse for Black Americans. These disparities are not accidental. They are the inevitable outcomes of systems designed through hostility or neglect to make it harder for Black Americans to flourish, or even to survive.

As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops put it in its recent letter, "Open Wide Our Hearts": "Racism can only end if we contend with the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality — economic and social — that we still see all around us."

It's that last part that may be the hardest. Because seeing injustice is but the first step on the road to justice. Taking that step means being able to put aside one's own fears and sensitivities surrounding the issue of racial injustice. It means being able to see the fears of those who may not look like us, or live near us, or be able to afford what we can afford, to see their aspirations, their desire for safe neighborhoods, good education, meaningful job opportunities. It means, in a word, cultivating empathy.

For people of faith, it means looking at one another not as competitors in a cultural contest, as if the success of one kind of person requires the failure of another. No, we are called to look upon one another as God looks upon us, as responsible for one another, as children of the Creator who fashioned us in his image, and who wants nothing more for his family than a life of lasting peace secured by abiding justice. Or, to put it another way, as Pope Paul VI did: "If you want peace, work for justice."