

ELECTION 2008: *Voting the Common Good*

Racism and Poverty

Considering only the historic presidential election cycle of 2008 is likely to give a false, even naïve, perception that racism has finally been laid to rest in the country. Yes, for the first time a black man is the presidential nominee of a major party. Yes, a growing, but not yet significant, number of black men and women have moved up the economic ladder and into relatively powerful positions in business and politics. But these pictures of success need to be juxtaposed with the pictures of hurricane Katrina which exposed the harsh reality of race-based poverty in the U.S.

Today, the U.S. is becoming more racially and culturally diverse than ever before. At least one out of three Americans is now "Latino or non-white." Due to immigration patterns and differing birth rates among diverse populations, it appears likely that by mid century, whites will no longer be the majority race in the U.S. (Poverty and Racism, 2007, 3). The new and growing non-white population is currently bearing the greatest poverty in the country. Consider the following facts from the Catholic Charities report Poverty and Racism:

- The highest rates of poverty are among children, especially children of color. The poverty rate for white children is 10 percent, while it is 28 percent for Latino children, 27 percent for Native-American children, and 33 percent for African American children.
- African Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans are about three times as likely to live in poverty as are whites. While the poverty rate for non-Hispanic whites is 8 percent, the rate for African Americans is 24.1 percent, for Hispanics, 21.8 percent and for Native Americans, 23.2 percent.
- The most extreme poverty in the United States is concentrated in specific geographical areas such as the urban cores of major cities and Native American reservations. These areas of concentrated poverty are the result of decades of policies that confined the impoverished to these economically isolated areas.
- Finally, we also noted the stark racial disparity in the distribution of wealth in the United States. White families not only have on average 10 times the net worth of families of color, but also between 1998 and 2001, their wealth grew by 20 percent, while the net worth of African American households actually declined during that same period (3).

These changing demographics challenge the U.S. government and citizens to confront again the unfinished business of achieving racial justice and inclusion in our society.

While recognizing the undeniable changes that have occurred in our society since the Civil Rights struggles of the last century, the U.S. still remains a highly racialized society, "that is a society wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships. We are a nation that allocates differential economic, political, social and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines . . . At its core, racism is a system of racially conferred—and denied—privilege, advantage, ben-



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efits, and status. . . Racism today remains what it has always been: a defense of (white) racial privilege" [parenthesis added] (Emerson and Smith, 2000 and Wellman, 1993 as quoted in Poverty and Racism, 2007, 7).

Clearly naming racism is discomfoting for the white race which does not recognize that it is privileged by the continuing discrimination against and exclusion of people of color. That privilege is woven into the fabric of the society and has been protected and advanced by public policy decisions throughout the history of society. During the 1960s the Civil Rights laws began to break down that privilege, but laws alone cannot change the hearts and minds of people: a task that lies ahead for the nation.

As Catholic Christians, our faith calls us to recognize that all people are made in the image and likeness of our God and we are all brothers and sisters in that divine family. Diversity is a gift of God and mirrors the Trinitarian life. Our unity and diversity draws us together in support of everyone's welfare, especially the most vulnerable among us. Making space and creating opportunities for those in poverty, especially those who face racial discrimination, must be a key commitment to the future.

Given the pervasive nature of poverty among people of color; almost all areas of the U.S. economic and social structures need to be transformed, but first there must be a renewed commitment to racial equality as a national goal and priority. The key areas to be addressed include, affordable housing, quality educational opportunities for those in poverty, access to technology, comprehensive immigration reform, comprehensive reform of the criminal justice system and increased investment in the nation's social safety net.