

What does God say about racism?



Dear Father Kerper: For many years, my parents have supported the Church's charitable works and taught us to respect all people regardless of race. I'm teaching my children the same. But I recently read a disturbing statement about racism from a Catholic leader. He said: "For me as a white person, saying I'm not a racist is like saying a fish is not wet. In America, racism is no longer a question but rather it's the toxic water in which we all swim." It appears that the Church is identifying my family and me as racists regardless of our behavior and values. Can you clarify what the Church teaches about these matters?

Thanks for sharing your concern about what sounds like an accusation of universal and unrepentant racism among all faithful Catholics. This statement actually came from a mid-level employee of a small Catholic diocese on the West Coast. His assertion of "systemic racism" expresses a specific academic theory, not Catholic doctrine. While Catholics can hold different opinions and theories about racism, we need to know exactly what the Church proposes as true and certain.

As to racism, the Church has said very little. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* simply repeats a text from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65): "Every form of social or cultural discrimination in funda-

mental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design."

The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, published in 2006 by our own bishops, is blunt: "Racism is an attitude that rejects the fundamental equality of all human beings. It shows itself in discrimination and unjust actions against people of other races. Both slavery and racism are gravely immoral."

Here the bishops of the United States identified racism as *gravely immoral* because it *directly contradicts* God's plan for humanity. This happens when we rank other human beings by color, language,

religion, age, legal status and so on. By doing so, we diminish some and exalt others, fragmenting humanity. This inevitably causes violence, emotional suffering, isolation and injustice.

Some people, of course, like to talk among themselves about racism. But we must eventually move away from ourselves and pop the big question: What does God think?

We peer into God's mysterious ways through a wonderful little tale from the Book of Numbers, the fourth scroll of the Torah. Through it, we clearly see God's response to racism.

Here's what happened.

Moses and the Israelites had been wandering in the desert, gradually moving toward the Promised Land. Now and then, they pitched camp. During these times of rest, the Israelites enjoyed stirring up trouble. Chapter 12 of Numbers describes one such uproarious conflict involving three siblings: Moses, Aaron and Miriam.

Many years earlier, Moses had married a woman named Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. He then decided to marry a second wife. No one knows her name; but the Bible identifies her as a Cushite. The term "Cushite," which appears several times in sacred Scripture,

is interchangeable with “Ethiopian,” which literally means “burnt face” — black.

Miriam and Aaron, sister and brother of Moses, opposed the marriage between Moses and the non-Hebrew Cushite woman. To make matters worse, Miriam and Aaron actively agitated against the Cushite bride, hoping to derail the wedding. In response to Miriam and Aaron’s plotting, God, who knows everything, did something *highly unusual*: God spoke directly to Miriam and Aaron. God’s *direct* intervention indicated the seriousness of the matter. It was no ordinary family spat. The inspired writer of Numbers richly described the dramatic scene:

“God descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent. God called Aaron and Miriam and they both came forward. God said: ‘To Moses my whole household is entrusted; to him I speak face to face, plainly and not in riddles, and he sees God’s form. How then could you dare to criticize my servant Moses?’” (Nm 12:6-8)

As God withdrew from the scene, white sores of leprosy covered Miriam from head to toe, a horrible punishment for criticizing Moses over his Cushite wife. (Note: Aaron escaped punishment because he was a *priest*. Leprosy would have rendered him “unclean,” thereby making it impossible for him to perform the necessary tasks of the priesthood.)

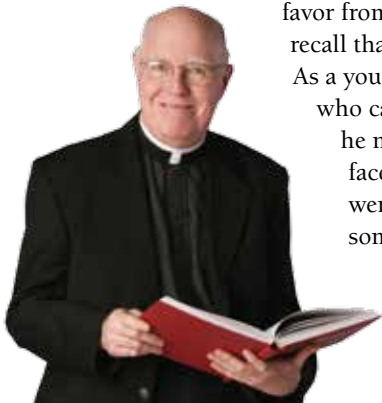
This story offers no *theological theory* about racism. It does, however, portray God’s response to people who make distinctions among human beings based on skin color and foreign origins. Whether Miriam and Aaron resented their brother’s Cushite wife because of her skin color or alien status is unknown. Perhaps both produced their animosity. What is abundantly clear, however, is that their attack against Moses, whatever its motive, greatly displeased God. For sure, the unusual severity of the punishment inflicted on Miriam verified the gravity of her sin.

Moses, described in Numbers as “the humblest man on earth,” (Nm 12:3) immediately prayed for Miriam. “Moses pleaded with God: O God, please heal her!” (Nm 12:13) God graciously granted the request of Moses, but only after she had endured a seven-day quarantine outside of the camp.

This biblical story is yet another witness to God’s abhorrence of any form of race-based nationalism or discrimination. The Old Testament, while clearly affirming the unique status of Israel, frequently elevates “aliens,” pointing to their goodness, character and favor from God. Moreover, we should recall that Moses was married twice.

As a young man he married Zipporah, who came from Midian. Much later, he married the unnamed “burnt face” woman from Ethiopia. Both were foreigners. Is God telling us something?

God doesn’t waste time with theories. Instead, God *acts* justly, defending the aggrieved and downtrodden. We honor God and all his children by doing likewise. ■



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