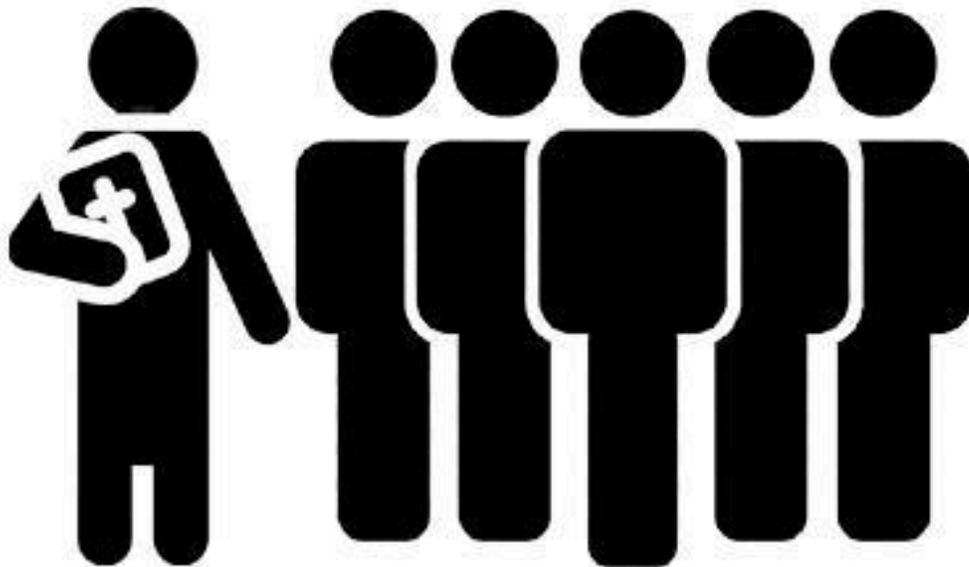


# A PASTORAL LETTER

*on Racism*

***FROM... FOR... BY...***



# AFRICAN AMERICANS

*21st Century*

Fr. Roy A. Lee, Ph.D.

Volume 1

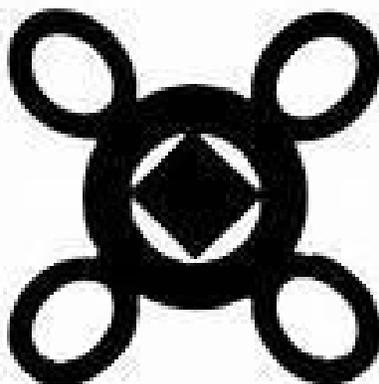
## Why a Pastoral Letter on Racism is Necessary

There are some people asking, why a Pastoral Letter on Racism: From Us, For Us, By Us-African Americans in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is necessary. Simply put, Pastoral Letters have been a long-standing vehicle for communication since the beginning of religion. The genesis can be dated back to when God gave us the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were nothing more than a mode of communication of how people should live their lives according to the will of God. Those tablets contained God's signature to Moses to give to the people of God.

St. Paul wrote numerous letters to the various communities, the Ephesians, Corinthians and Colossians. These letters were again, addressing various issues and concerns that were prevalent in his time. Today, this Pastoral Letter is written from, for and by African American Catholics who know the needs of our own community, better than those who live outside our communities. Realizing that this sin of racism is not a sin created by African Americans, but a sin that was created by those who hold positions of power and control over God's people. As a reflection, this Pastoral Letter on Racism is written for the common people who are sitting in the pew every Sunday morning. A letter that can and hopes to speak to the people of God, African Americans, who have full knowledge of the struggles of our people. A struggle that has been magnified in the last five years for the African American community in this great country called the USA.

Let us approach this Pastoral Letter with an open mind and a loving heart to hear the voice of God speak to us today and tomorrow. *Ashe!*

— Fr. Roy A. Lee, Ph.D  
*Itinerary Preacher, Teacher, Author,  
Homeless Ministry, Jail Ministry,  
Chair of House of Globalization,  
Atlanta, Georgia*



## We Don't Need Another Hero.

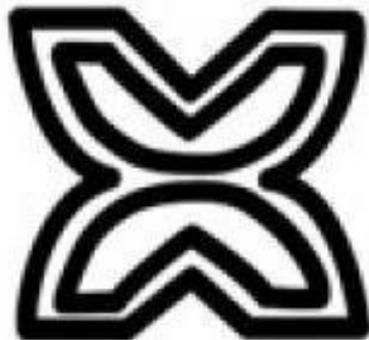
The Black community is in dire need of a Catholic voice and the Catholic Church is in dire need of a Black voice. The history of this church in this community is dotted with moments of celebration when what was, is and shall always be is a need for a movement.

While we rightly remember those who have gone before us and stand on their shoulders, the rock upon which we stand requires a reclamation and the Spirit requires a movement of rising.

We need a Word that compels us to wait only on the Lord. To rise up from these dry bones and old chains waiting for someone else to free us. To rise up from this watching and waiting to see how we shall next be oppressed, disappointed and ignored; and more grandly rise up from the sunken place to meet one another and assist each other in the blessed place where all God's children have a good time.

A pastoral letter is a first step to call us, the People of God, to order our steps in the Word of God. A Word that reminds us that we have never seen the righteous forsaken, are not alone nor afraid, and have made a vow unto the Lord to see what the end shall be. A Word is needed to call and move us back together, call and move us back to God, call and move us back to church, call and move us back to freedom.

— *Fr. David Jones, Pastor  
St. Benedict the African  
Chicago, IL*



## Black Culture, Catholic Faith

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity... We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural (Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 117).

Pope Francis teaches that the Good News of salvation is discoverable in every human cultural context. He emphasizes that Jesus is present and active in the midst of all God's people, wherever and however they organize themselves to make sense of life. Through the ages, however, the sin of racism, prevalent among the peoples most "closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought", has deprived God's people the full embrace of cultural diversity and its contributions to a vibrant and holy Body of Christ as the Church.

Through the grace of God and stubborn perseverance in the truth that all humanity is created in the divine image and likeness, Black Catholics have existed in Catholic spaces as expressions of the Blackness of God. As the corps of Black Catholic scholars – theologians, social scientists, historians - has grown and raised collective voice, the Black Catholic faithful are beginning to enculturate their understandings and practices of the faith with core elements of Black culture, reaching deeply into the heritage of African peoples on the continent and in the diaspora. This maturity in faith comes with the understanding that Blackness offers the Church and the world community a much deeper experience of humanity than that represented in the more tangible representations of Black culture: music, food, dress, performance, festivals, for example. For many, these expressions are the essence of Black humanity. This underestimation of God's gift of Blackness plays out in many categories of life in the Catholic Church, including evangelization, leadership, vocations, catechesis, academia, worship and other pastoral ministries.

As contemporary Black Catholics struggle mightily to effectively evangelize their own families and communities, it becomes apparent to some that the Catholic Church will become essentially a relic of its making unless and until it recognizes cultural diversity as God's plan for humanity and then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, gets with the Creator God's program and Christ's mission to welcome all the people with equal dignity and respect for who they are and the gifts with which they have been

endowed. The history of the U.S. Church is replete with the contributions of resilient and faithful Black Catholics, for example, some of whom are recorded in the historical works of Cyprian Davis, OSB and others. This legacy of Black Catholicism is a hidden treasure among many, made invisible by the systemic racism of the Church that devalues the oppressor and the oppressed among us.

Black Catholics and other faith communities on the margins support the Church's 21<sup>st</sup> century reality check and share responsibility for its ongoing conversion by facilitating mature dialogue between Church "officials" (those who currently control the decision-making **and** the budget) and the Black faithful (who include generations from the young to the elder). That two-way conversation must begin with a focus on introducing or adapting Catholic Christian praxis that organically incorporates the faith in everyday Black ways of life – in experiences formal and informal. The reciprocal dialogue: as the faith becomes more and more a way of life for the people, their embodiment will produce new and different expressions of Catholic Christianity that will naturally become part of the Church's own cultural portfolio, expanding and diversifying its resources to creatively, effectively evangelize those who already believe and newcomers to the faith.

A step towards shoring up the Catholic Body of Christ as a relevant voice and actor in these trying times is a Black Catholic document that speaks to the state of the Church from the perspective of the pews. For many, the Church is philosophically and practically opposed to cultural diversity. The inability of the institution to celebrate the growth of the faith in South America, Asia and Africa is particularly worrisome because it points to the inability of the system to recognize "God's presence, activity, power and victory" anywhere where the majority population is non-white (that includes predominantly black parishes in the U.S.). The Church needs to know that many Black Catholics and prospective Catholics experience Catholicism as a system that prefers uniformity in a tradition rooted in Europe over a truly "catholic" culture committed to unifying the many true expressions of the faith. The anti-black racism and oppression of a Church infected by white supremacy needs to be called and rooted out for the health and well-being of all God's people.

— Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, DMin  
Institute for Black Catholic Studies  
September 29, 2021



## Being the Prosthetic Part of the Body of Christ

Several months ago, I received a call from the mother of one of my mentees. He had recently moved from New Orleans to take a job with a logging company in Georgia. The mother was frantic and sobbing uncontrollably to the point that I could not understand what she was saying. When we were finally able to communicate clearly, she said that her son was in a severe accident involving one of the machines at work and his arm would have to be amputated as a result of the incident. Over the next few months, after much fundraising, emotional discussions, and prayer, the young man accepted his fate and was now excited about his new prosthetic arm. He would even send me videos of him going to physical therapy to learn how to use the new robotic appendage. I remember in one of the videos, the medical professional giving this advice to the young man, “Remember, you cannot do everything with this robotic arm. It can help, but it is limited because it is not fully a part of your body.”

Unfortunately, Black, specifically African American, Catholics are often treated as prosthetics in the Body of Christ we call the Catholic Church. Due to America’s “original sin” of racism, we have yet to be fully welcomed as our authentic selves into a Church that we have been a part of, helped to grow, and have forgiven multiple times since its beginnings. The Church, specifically the white run organizations that fall under it, call on us when there are issues or crisis that need to be solved or addressed, but will not tolerate those of us who try to create change, by holding these white organizations accountable, within the church so that it can truly be a welcoming place for all who are a part of it. Most of the times such “prophets” are dismissed, ostracized, and labeled as troublemakers or even “anti-Church,” while those Black folks that do not rock the boat or challenge Eurocentric norms/ideals are promoted or included in various events or decision-making meetings/processes. Thus, the cycle continues until there is another PR crisis where our voices are needed to give these organizations direction or validity within the communities they have ignored or hurt for so long.

For example, I have been a part of a national youth ministry organization since 2007. I have served this organization in various capacities for these 14 years. There were very few Black Catholics that were a part of this group due to the makeup of how membership was set up then (diocesan employees), and because it was a revolving door of Black Catholics that were sick of them not addressing racism within

youth ministry on a diocesan and national level within the Church. There were several of us over the years that continued to call this organization to task over what they focused on and ignored within their programming and resources. Due to this, we were ostracized from various committees, overlooked for employment opportunities, and even receive negative comments from other members when we would be present. This same organization would still call me because they would want black youth – that they struggled to have connections with – to be present at their conferences. Following the murder of George Floyd, I received a call from their staff, that I did not have the proper credentials to be a part of (it was assumed that I did not have any Hispanic/Latino ministry experience), to help put together their anti-racism resources for their website and organization. I was also part of several listening sessions with Black Catholic leadership around the country with their board and staff because, suddenly, racism was a hot button issue. I was also part of individual calls with some of the staff to give advice on how to diversify programming or various other ideas to make their programming relevant to the Black Catholic Youth Ministry community. The more I connected them with folks from our community (something I had been doing since 2007), the more that either they were uncomfortable, or they chose to go with folks that did not challenge them to change but instead affirmed what they were already doing. Often these organizations will promote getting into heaven, but do not want to address the hell that communities of color are experiencing in society. On a personal note, I have always showed up, given of myself and my youth/young adults as resources, empowered my community to support this organization, yet, when Hurricane Ida slammed the Louisiana Gulf Coast on Sunday, August 29, 2021, we did not hear anything from those same staff and leaders that needed our “help” at various points over the past 14 years, especially after the murder of George Floyd. There was no communication to see if we were ok or what our community may need.

I share this personal testimony, not for pity’s sake, but to give an example of how this is part of the bigger problem with how racism affects how many of these national organizations “relate” to the Black Catholic community. In a society where the Black, specifically African American, community has been disregarded unless it can serve, entertain, or create opportunities for white society, the Church, through its white-led organizations, have operated in those same veins. Once we are finished being useful, we are cast away or dismissed. Much like the medical professional’s advice to my mentee, we, as Black folk, can help, but are limited because we are not fully seen as part of the Body of Christ. Many times, we are called in as consultants to help these national orgs “address” their race problems, but after this pain-porn is done being on display, nothing changes. No power is shared. Hardly any resources are

diverted. It has become something that many of these organizations can “check off” their diversity to do list. The Church can and must do better. Our people have been saying this in numerous ways throughout our Church’s history, including but not limited to, the Pastoral Letter, *What We Have Seen and Heard*, by the Black Bishops of the United States in 1984. Yet here we are several decades later saying the same things. My question is, what will it take for the Church to see us as fully functioning parts of the Body of Christ and not just a prosthetic to be used when needed.

— *Ansel Augustine, DMin*  
*Dr. Ansel Augustine is from New Orleans, LA*  
*and has worked in ministry on various levels for over 20 years.*

## For Us — By Us

Here we are again addressing this evil behavior called “Racism” an evil which we have been talking and talking and talking until some of us are sick and tired of being sick and tired about talking about this sin on Racism. Knowing that this sin on Racism does not belong to the African American community and yet we as African American people allow ourselves to be pulled into a sin that does not belong to us. A sin that was built on the understanding and perception that some people in our society are not fully human nor deserve equal opportunity like some who are given this right because of the color of their skin. Unfortunately, this sin on Racism has spilled over to the African American community when it comes to “colorism” that is who is lighter and darker and that determines how some people are treated by others in the African American community. Let us not be dupped into thinking we must continue to clean up a mess that does not belong to us, but to clean up a mess that must preserve the Peace and Love that our ancestors left for us to continue. It is within this legacy the African American community must take a honest look at ourselves and ask ourselves the serious question about us and how the us is taking care of one another through the power of Love and transformation. A transformation that put an end to anything that is negative and destructive when it comes to the things we do to one another, the things we allow to come into our lives when it comes to what we look at, the things we allow our ears to learn to, thus allow the outside noise to influence the inner Peace and Love that was given to us in and through the ancestors who received it from a power bigger than themselves – a God power!

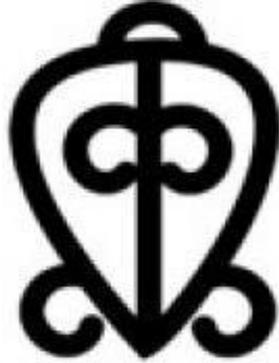
Let us take a moment to address the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’. We are at a place in time where we must not allow the system of the institutional church to divide us thru various age-old means. Let me explain. This is the scenario. You have persons who are on the payroll of the church, working indirectly for the bishop and those who actually work directly for the bishop. I realize that may sound ambiguous, but just think about it for a moment...Those who earn their living, employees of the church, are expected to follow orders mandate by their boss, the bishop. This is true for any company or organization. There is an unwritten rule that you support and not challenge your boss. Understood.

But, and this is where we have issues, and this is a big but, the boss, the bishop does not consult or take into consideration all communities in the decision-making, specifically the African American community. But, again, but, he asks a particular African-American or maybe two or three, their ‘opinion’ on a subject; already knowing the response he will receive. How can that be? Simple, they are on his payroll, they are what was once referred to as the ‘house-negro’. The question is asked to get the response he wants because, they are indebted to him and need their jobs. Then it is stated that the African-American community supports his decision. A community of possibly three. This is fallacy that we have lived with for so very long. What we want and need is for the boss to be bold enough to seek and hear all aspects on a subject and base his decision on true opinions of the community.

And then we have undercurrents of dissension, where the African-American community is pitted against the African community, our brothers and sisters from the continent and the islands. What we as a brown, black, other than white group, must not allow is to be divided. We must utilize every opportunity to bridge the gap and learn from one another. We will address this in Volume 3 of the Pastoral Letter on Racism.

Finally, as African Americans we must understand what is our fight and what is the fight of the Anglo church. They are not, unfortunately the same.

— Fr. Roy A. Lee, Ph.D  
*Itinerary Preacher, Teacher, Author,  
Homeless Ministry, Jail Ministry,  
Chair of House of Globalization,  
Atlanta, Georgia*



## Why Are Black Folk Still in the Catholic Church?

Often when people find out that I am a deacon in the catholic church, they are both surprised that I am a deacon and that I am Catholic. This is followed by some variation on this Statement, “I didn’t know there were any Black people in the Catholic Church”. This is not unexpected. I think the broader question is this, “Why are there Black people still in the Catholic Church?” The church in the United States reflects the broader society in which it finds itself. All the isms that infect society, infect the church as well. Primary reason of these isms is Racism. Yes, there is racism in the church. I am Not saying that the church is racist. I am saying that racism exists in the church. Ask any Black catholic if they have experienced racism in the church and I venture to say that nearly all will answer in the affirmative. It may be subtle or overt, but it is there. Just look at some of the demographics. Of the 260 active bishops in the US, only 6 Black bishops are active. Of the 70.4 million Catholics in the US, 3 million are Black. Most Black people worship in predominantly Black parishes. Why is this so? These parishes were established during the “Jim Crow” era. Why? It was to maintain racial segregation. That is racism pure and simple. The church participated in the willful separation of its flock. This is a fact. It cannot be debated or washed away. There was intentional planning and cooperation between the church leadership and the state to maintain the status quo. Yet Black people remained faithful to the creed of the church. Why?

That is not an easy question to answer? In the face of neglect or outright hostility, Black Catholics have survived and, in some areas, thrived. This, faithfulness to the church, has not been easy nor appreciated. There are too many areas of leadership in the church which are either poorly represented by Black Catholics or not represented at all. There are too many councils, conferences, and meetings about us at which we are not at the table. Where are our voices when needed to speak out against injustices? The injustice in funding which keeps some people in intergenerational poverty, denying adequate housing, and food supplies? The injustice that incarcerates a disproportionate number of African American men (and women), usually for relatively minor offences. The church is charged with being an advocate for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the incarcerated etc. Black people, some catholic fall into one or more of these categories. Yet, too often, the churches’ response is tepid.

We see that our issues don’t get the type of attention which is given to other groups. In recent years we have witness the rolling back of much of the progress which Black Catholics made in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Many dioceses have either closed or folded offices of Black Catholics into

“Multi-cultural or Ethnic Diversity Offices” or closed inner city churches and schools. This has had the effect of rendering Black Catholics all, but invisible.

But there is hope. I believe that, in the end, what keeps Black people in the Catholic Church is our unfailing believe in Jesus Christ and his message of hope, love, justice, and peace. I believe that we have an inner spirit-knowledge that the church is not the leadership or the institutional structures. The church is not the scandals, of the fallen leaders. The church, we know and love and will follow, is the Body of Christ. We know that those in leadership roles come and go. But the church founded by the Lord and fixed on the rock of Peter will last forever and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Many of our ancestors kept their eye on the prize and refused to leave as well because they knew the Truth and that Truth was in Christ Jesus. That is the reason that so many of us are determined to stay the course. I will not let bad leadership, scandals, or any ism keep me from being faithful to the creed I profess at every Mass.

I am Catholic and proud. I am not going away.

— Deacon Al Douglas Turner

*Deacon Turner is a deacon of the Archdiocese of Washington. He retired from his position as Director of the Office of Black Catholics in 2015. The office was closed shortly afterwards. He is living in the Atlanta Archdiocese and is in active ministry at St John Vianney Catholic Church in Lithia Springs, GA.*



## Time to Move Beyond Patience and Silence

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, whether your family has been Catholic for many years or just joined the Church during the Easter vigil this spring, you probably have been in a situation where some racially motivated event has happened and everyone is talking about it except the priest. You arrive at Mass, daily or Sunday, expecting that the Church will do her part by comforting the afflicted. This time you are the afflicted. Society has inflicted a terrible blow; and you wait for the homily or reflection to denounce the racism and its ugly, negative impact on the people of God. What you get is a couple of jokes and a homily or message that does not speak to your pain or address the illness present in our society.

I have been waiting; actually, all of us regardless of our culture, sitting in a pew have been waiting patiently for the Church to preach from the documents she has generated about the evil of racism. When my children were younger and being impatient, I would sing to them “Patience is a virtue.” I would then have them repeat after me. “Patience is a virtue.” I have asked my children to be patient. I am at the point where I cannot wait any longer. I bet many of you feel the same way. I refuse to be patient; and I will no longer be silent.

We can no longer silently and patiently wait for our clergy to preach about the evils of racism. Our ancestors, on whose shoulders we stand, deserve better; and, if we want there to be future generations of practicing Catholics, we must be willing to demand better now. Romans 12:4, “For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function,”

We have been waiting for someone else to proclaim that the Catholic Church is against racism, and it is our Church. It is our responsibility to proclaim it, perhaps not from the ambo, and live it. We are allowed to hold the Church accountable and to ask for the plan to address racism in our communities and in our parishes because we know that sin of racism does not stop at church doors. It is time to move beyond patience and silence in the pew: the pray and obey model of being a good Catholic. It is time to move forward with conviction and love which we draw from the teachings of Jesus. Our priests ask us to serve in a lot of capacities. This time the priests are not asking; but if we are going to address the sin of racism, we must step forward anyway.

— *Lauren M. Green,*  
*Diocese of Raleigh, North Carolina*



## What Racism Means to Me as an African-American

What does Racism mean to me as an African-American? There never will be a complete answer. It would encompass the new buzz word...it's fluid. For me and I'm sure many others, the meaning changes based on the situation...yes, it's fluid. As a child of the 60's, growing up in the South, specifically Northwest Florida, we tried to tell ourselves it wasn't as bad as it was in Alabama and Mississippi, because we were in Florida. And history tells us that Florida wasn't a part of the Confederacy, it was Florida, Spanish rule, but then if that was so, what about Rosewood? It was real. Real, Racism, Real Prejudice, Real Separate but not Equal. Racism was going to the movies and having to walk around to the side after paying your money in the front window and climb 5-flights of iron stairs on the outside of the building to reach the balcony. Racism was having to drive to Johnson's Beach about 25 miles west of the city, because we were not allowed on the beach that was just across the bay, three miles away. Racism is when your teacher, a nun, looks at the collars of the students in the class and looks with surprise that they are not dirty or our color had not smudged off. Racism, is when your music teacher found out you were attending the elementary school he graduated from, and blurts out, 'You can't go there!'"

### *Racism is Exhausting.*

And as we witness all that is going on around us, and the complacency of those who could lend a hand in changing things, you wonder, 'was it ever any better or will it ever get any better?' As a Christian woman, you ask yourself what can I do to effect change? Or will the little I do, really make a difference? And the lofty answer is YES! Each of us, must be an example and stay strong in our faith that one day, there will be a change. But the Catholic church needs to listen...yes, listen. The powers that be in the Catholic church like to say they listen, but in essence they only talk. Let me explain. There have been 'listening sessions' set up around the country in many dioceses to have a conversation on racism. But only a select few are invited or it's held in some location that is not conducive to the very people who are most effected by racism. Or the session is held in the middle of the day when most people are at work and it's said that the turn-out was disappointing. The church doesn't want to discuss racism, it wants it to go away, but doesn't want to put the work in to help it go away. Or, when

they set up the listening sessions, they often invite representatives to these discussions they view as ‘non-challenging’. And heaven help those who speak their minds. Then, you’re having a bad day or a mental episode or even still, they go on the offensive and try to discredit you....and we know how that ends. What I’m saying simply is this, we as people of color don’t need to talk about racism, we are well versed in it, we experience it on a daily basis. Our melanin-challenged brothers and sisters need to have the honest conversations on racism. They need to understand that we as a people are intelligent and industrious; we are not looking for hand-outs, but we are looking for the playing field in our neighborhoods to have the same amenities as in your neighborhoods...a level ground.

The Catholic church has used the ostrich approach on every controversial topic that has occurred, one would think that the track record on that would make them see that they must take their heads out of the sand and acknowledge its’ continued mistakes and truly be convicted in correcting them. It has to start now. Our leadership talks a good game, but it only talks to those who will not challenge them. That strategy needs to be done...get a new game plan, a real one, be brave, take a real stand for everyone, all believers, the faithful. It’s time.

— *Carmen Jenkins*  
*Our Lady of Lourdes*  
*Atlanta, Georgia*



## Novena Prayer for the Pastoral Letters on Racism

Dear Jesus, you always wrote Love Letters to the people of God in and through sacred scripture so that we would never forget the Love of God, the Love this God has for each and every one of us. Your Letters encouraged, instructed, admonished and directed God's people. May our Pastoral Letters on Racism continue that work thru a love that will encourage, instruct, admonish and direct God's people so that we may live in a world that reflects Justice, Peace and Love in this changing and challenging world. May Mary our mother, queen of all races, intercede for us during this time of racial divide and political unrest. We ask this through her son, Jesus the Christ. Amen. *Ashe*

*One Our Father, One Hail Mary, and One Glory Be*

— *Fr. Roy A. Lee, Ph.D*  
*Itinerary Preacher, Teacher, Author,*  
*Homeless Ministry, Jail Ministry,*  
*Chair of House of Globalization,*  
*Atlanta, Georgia*





*Our Lady of the Oppressed, Pray for Us!*



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