

Rejecting Racism: Welcome, Protect, Promote and Integrate

I was only ten years of age when Martin Luther King delivered the famous speech at the Lincoln Memorial, in which he said: 'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.' I remember saying to my mother that we were blessed that we had no racism in Ireland. She, being older and wiser than I, replied that this was partly because there were so few people of other races in Ireland. That situation has changed significantly over the past twenty years. Ethnic diversity is now part and parcel of life in towns and villages all over Ireland.

While the majority of Irish people are welcoming of the 'new neighbours,' there are some disturbing signs of racial prejudice, especially towards those who have arrived as refugees and those who don't speak our language or share our culture. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace defines racial prejudice as 'conviction of the biologically determined superiority of one's own race or ethnic group with respect to others.'¹ Racial prejudice can impact negatively on any person or group of people whose ethnic origin, language, religion or culture makes them appear different.

In June 2019, the Irish Catholic Bishops expressed their concern at:

'the rising number of incidents of racism, xenophobia, and religious intolerance in Ireland – carried out sometimes by those who consider themselves faithful Christians – and which can occur anonymously or otherwise on social media, in quiet conversations, by open verbal onslaughts or through physical violence.'²

Why would this be happening in Ireland, especially considering our strong missionary tradition and our ethos of support for the work of organisations such as Trocaire, Concern and Goal?

Pragmatic or 'Soft' Racism

In our relatively small island community, we take pride in knowing our neighbours;



Shahbaz Rana, Dublin Bus; Brian Killoran, CEO, Immigrant Council of Ireland; Sammy Akorede of Transdev [Luas]; Anne Graham of the NTA; Dublin taxi driver Jim Waldron; Elaine Doyle of Local Link Wexford; and Fabio Carlamusto of Bus Eireann at the launch of the 2016 Transport Against Racism campaign.

their 'seed, breed and generation,' and where we stand with them. When tensions exist, we like to manage them carefully. We also know how to engage with people of other cultures and ethnic groups, when they are 'over there.' But, somehow, it can be more challenging when they are 'over here.' Some of us may simply be uncomfortable with what is unfamiliar. Others, however, resent the very fact that these people are in 'our' space and are using 'our' resources and services.

Have we forgotten that many of 'our' essential services are provided by people who have come to Ireland from Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia and the Middle East? Have we lost sight of the fact that many of our own people have been and still are 'strangers and sojourners' in foreign lands (Deut 10:19). Pope Francis says: 'The problem is not that we have doubts and fears. The problem is when they condition our way of thinking and acting to the point of making us intolerant, closed and perhaps even – without realizing it – racist.'³ Pragmatic racism often begins with the vague suspicion that those who are different pose some kind of threat to our well-being. Those

suspensions then harden and become the fertile ground for the more ideological racism that can so easily take root in a society.

Ideological Racism

I went for a walk one day in downtown Durban, where almost everybody was 'black' or 'coloured.' A little boy pointed at me and said to his mother: 'Look there's a white man!' I was amused because innocent curiosity is not racism. Racism as an ideology begins when we start defining people as superior or inferior, depending on the shape of their head, their facial features or the colour of their skin. Segregation has been a tool of racist ideology ever since the time of Moses. It undermines the formation of trusting interpersonal relationships and contributes instead to ignorance, fear and suspicion. Once we convince ourselves that certain categories of people are somehow less human than we are, it becomes easier to justify depriving them of basic human rights, such as the right to property, the right to education or even the right to life.

While pragmatic racism has its roots in self-centred individualism, ideological

racism has its roots in the refusal to accept the uniqueness and individuality of the other as a person. As Jesus himself points out (Mt 15:19), it is in the heart that attitudes are formed, and it is out of these attitudes of the heart that actions flow. Ultimately, racism will not be eradicated without changing peoples' hearts and forming new attitudes.

Twenty Action Points

Pope Francis has taken a very personal interest in how migrants and refugees can be supported and protected. The section on Migrants and Refugees of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development, which is overseen directly by Pope Francis, has formulated *Twenty Action Points* as a contribution to the development of best practice in international law.⁴ It is summed up, as the Pope says, in four verbs: *welcome, protect, promote* and *integrate*. Included in these action points, alongside physical protection and opportunities for education and employment, are special provisions for the protection of minors and the reunification of families. Fundamental to the whole strategy is the idea that people will not be discriminated against or exploited just because they are different.

Pope Francis comments that these four verbs:

'do not apply only to migrants and refugees. They describe the Church's mission to all those living in the existential peripheries, who need to be welcomed, protected, promoted and integrated.... Migrants, especially those who are most vulnerable, help us to read the 'signs of the times.' Through them, the Lord is calling us to conversion, to be set free from exclusivity, indifference and the throw-away culture.'

One example of what Pope Francis is referring to might be the prevalence of a negative attitude in Irish society towards the travelling community as an ethnic group. As with any other group, of course, there are some travellers who are easier to work with or to live beside than others. But when our fears or frustrations in relation to individuals become the basis for our discrimination against an entire community, then we are slipping into racism.

A Local Church which Welcomes, Protects, Promotes and Integrates

If the Church in Ireland is to respond to

the vision of Catholic Social Teaching, I believe we will need, both as a community and as individual Christians, to take action to prevent racism, or to root it out wherever it exists. There are some practical ways in which we can begin to do that.

- We can begin by ensuring that cultural diversity is allowed to enrich the life and liturgy of the Church, by recognising the individual and collective gifts of Catholics who belong to ethnic minorities and encouraging their participation in the mission and ministry of the Church.
- While respecting their personal and family space, we can reach out the hand of friendship to people from other countries and religious traditions who move into our local communities.
- We can advocate for the development of a humane and racially equitable policy in relation to immigration and asylum. Direct Provision may not be motivated by racist ideology, but in practice, it is designed and operated in such a way that it prevents people from integrating, and in that way it contributes to the deepening of ignorance, resentment and suspicion.
- We can work actively against any vision of Europe which seeks to exclude the participation of less well-off nations, or which involves the exploitation of third world countries. We might not like to admit it, but the present increase in support for

extreme nationalism, with its focus on building walls and fences, is a symptom of ideological racism which, like a virus, is always with us in some form.

Notes

¹ *The Church and Racism*. Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 1988, # 8

² Irish Catholic Bishops Conference. *Concluding Statement of the Summer Meeting*. June 2019.

³ Pope Francis: *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees*, September 2019

⁴ Responding to Refugees and Migrants: Twenty Action Points for the Global Compacts. <https://migrants-refugees.va/20-action-points-migrants/> (accessed 4 July 2019).



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