

Statement of the Chicago Province on Immigration, Refugees and Racism

In light of growing intolerance of people of color in society, as well as government statements that promote this intolerance and government policies that work against the acceptance and welfare of immigrants and refugees, the Chicago Province of the Society of the Divine Word confirms the Society's long commitment to promote just relationships between peoples, races and nations. Building upon its own historical stance against racism, and its historical solidarity with immigrants, refugees and marginalized peoples, the Chicago Province states:

1. We condemn the racist rhetoric of government leaders and others that fuels the fires of racism, prejudice, xenophobia and white nationalism. We condemn the demonization and inhumane treatment of immigrants and refugees, the false narrative that paints them as criminals and job-stealers, and the abandonment of the historical welcome given to refugees by the United States.
2. Recognizing our own need for constant conversion, we commit ourselves to ongoing efforts to grow in truly intercultural community living and ministry. We commit ourselves to recognizing biases and racism within our own hearts and our communities, explore the dynamics of white privilege in the North American context of our province, and implement guided discussions, workshops, and presentations in our communities to carry this out. We affirm and pledge to deepen our intercultural life and mission, witnessing to the possibility of diverse nationalities, cultures, and races to form genuine community for a common purpose.
3. We will seek to educate, work and advocate for laws and policies that are just and according to Catholic Social Teachings. Hence, we continue to support the United States Catholic Bishops' stance, including the call for comprehensive immigration reform. The Province JPIC Coordinator will continue to educate members on these issues and urge the members to take appropriate actions. In our ministries, we will seek to educate those under our care, collaborate with other organizations defending the rights of immigrants and refugees, and work with others in calling out structural racism and making changes in local and national policies as needed.
4. In our parishes / direct apostolates, we will strengthen the priority given to African American and immigrant communities as the focus of our parish outreach. We will strengthen our historical bond to the African-American community in particular, as we committed ourselves to do at the 2018 Chicago Provincial Assembly and Chapter. We will continue to minister in multicultural parishes, improving our ability to facilitate movement from the fact of multiculturalism to genuine intercultural faith communities. We will offer resources for ongoing formation for those members engaged in these apostolates.
5. We wish to enhance our networking with other organizations, religious communities and movements sharing these concerns. We will support such organizations by giving opportunities to those confreres who wish to participate, and by giving financial support as we are able. In particular, we hope to strengthen our collaboration with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters in this regard.

Chicago Province – Society of the Divine Word

Statement on Immigration, Refugees and Racism

January 2020

Preamble

Since arriving in the United States, the Society of the Divine Word has been a leader in welcoming minorities into the Catholic Church: initially, German immigrants glad to know someone who spoke their language; in a ground breaking way, African Americans starting a century ago; then Hispanic immigrants as their numbers swelled in the 1960s; Vietnamese refugees after the fall of Saigon in the mid-1970s, and today people from many countries and cultures.

The 2018 Chicago Province Chapter took note of this legacy and saw the need to continue the emphasis on this missionary ministry by approving this resolution:

Racism / Interculturality

BE IT RESOLVED that whereas government and society promote prejudicial statements and stand against the acceptance and welfare of immigrants and refugees, we SVDs will seek to educate, work and advocate for laws and policies that are just and according to Catholic Social Teachings. Therefore, in this critical moment, we propose that the Provincial Council take charge of drafting a formal statement on immigration, refugees and racism.

Ballot: 45 Pro, 0 Con, 2 Abstained

Mark Weber, a former provincial and General Secretary for Studies who was also a missionary to Ghana and pastor of a historic African-American parish, was asked to prepare a formal statement (see page eight) and situate it in the context of social justice teachings of the Catholic Church and the efforts of the worldwide Society of the Divine Word (see pages two to seven).

At its meeting on January 28, 2020, the Provincial Council approved this statement and directed that it be distributed to all Chicago Province members and made available to members of the Southern and Western provinces. It also will be sent to the Superior General, the Generalate staff and the PANAM Zone leadership.

Quang Duc Dinh SVD
USC Provincial

Statement on Immigration, Refugees and Racism

I. The Context: Growing Hatred of the Other

The world is witnessing an increase in racism, bigotry, xenophobia, nationalist populism, white supremacy and hate speech. Public figures and government leaders in various countries and continents incite hatred of refugees seeking asylum. Ethnic, racial, and religious minorities are labeled as threats to economic prosperity and cultural norms. From the rise of Hindu nationalists in India, the stateless Rohingya people persecuted in Myanmar, the growth of anti-immigrant and nationalist parties across Europe, to the election of politicians espousing these views, the world has seen an increase in racist rhetoric and hate crimes against immigrants and racial and ethnic minority peoples.

The extreme polarization advocated by numerous elected leaders has exacerbated this reality and made the expression of such hatred more acceptable and more open. The language of being “invaded” by refugees fleeing from violence and poverty has allowed the United States government to enact severe restrictions on those who seek asylum, forcing them to wait across the border in Mexico in dangerous and vulnerable situations. Children separated from their parents, the threat to Dreamers who only know life in the United States, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids leading to deportation hearings and other such actions have divided and confused the public.

While local municipalities have been forced to review and revise policing policies and practices that clearly show bias against people of color, *Black Lives Matter* and other movements continue to reveal the need to address these issues more fully. Hate crimes reported to the FBI have increased by some 30% in the past few years, with nearly half of such crimes pertaining to race targeting African Americans in 2018. The number of hate crimes targeting Latinx and other ethnic minorities also have grown in the past several years.¹

II. The Catholic Church Response

Pope Francis has repeatedly addressed these issues, expressing his concern for immigrants in particular. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, he states:

Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all. For this reason, I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis. How beautiful are those cities which overcome paralyzing mistrust, integrate those who are different and make this very integration a new factor of development!²

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/12/politics/hate-crimes-data-fbi-2018/index.html>

² EG #210

The Pontiff has often noted the fears behind anti-immigrant stances, once stating that "It is the fear that makes us crazy."³ Following a series of populist and nationalist victories in the European elections in May 2019, Francis again acknowledged the fear behind anti-immigrant sentiments, linking it directly to racism: "To some extent, the fear is legitimate, also because the preparation for this encounter is lacking....But 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."⁴

Addressing the participants at an international conference on racism in the global context hosted at the Vatican, Francis challenged politicians to avoid exploiting this fear, noting an upsurge of "feelings of suspicion, fear, contempt and even hatred towards individuals or groups judged for their ethnic, national or religious identity and, as such considered not sufficiently worthy of being fully part of society's life" which "all too often inspire real acts of intolerance, discrimination or exclusion."⁵

In his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, Francis also links the issues of climate change, poverty and migration, writing:

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering... Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.⁶

The Pope has frequently challenged more affluent nations to accommodate such environmental refugees.

The Pope thus passionately applies the tradition of Catholic social teaching concerning immigrants and refugees to the current situation of massive global migration. Catholic social teaching concerning immigration can be seen as based upon three central principles.

- First**, it insists that people have the right to migrate to sustain their lives and the lives of their families;
- Second**, it acknowledges that a country has the right to regulate its borders and to control immigration;
- Third**, this regulation must be done with justice and mercy.

³ Responding to reporters during his flight to Panama in January 2019, as cited in

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pope-francis-says-fear-migrants-makes-us-crazy-n961611>.

⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7075723/Pope-Francis-warns-against-intolerance-racism-migrants.html>, 20 September 2018.

⁵ <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-09/pope-francis-racism-conference-human-rights.html> 20 September 2018

⁶ *Laudato Si'*, #26.

Thus, it is important to realize that “principles one and two must be understood in the context of principle three. Similarly, all Catholic social teaching must be understood in light of the absolute equality of all people and the commitment to the common good.”⁷

The United States and the Mexican Catholic bishops conferences, in their 2003 joint pastoral letter *Strangers No Longer*, expanded these basic principles to specify particular concerns in the North American context, including the rights and protection of refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants. They also strongly note the need to improve social and economic conditions in those countries from which immigrants are fleeing, addressing the root causes of mass migration.⁸

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops also has addressed racism over the years. Their 1979 Pastoral Letter, *Brothers and Sister to Us*, was marked by the direct statement that “racism is a sin” that divides the human family. The letter also called out the structural racism of the time, exposing racism in housing, employment and incarceration patterns within society. Thus, the bishops called for transformation of both the individual and structures: “Racism is not merely one sin among many; it is a radical evil that divides the human family and denies the new creation of a redeemed world. To struggle against it demands an equally radical transformation, in our own minds and hearts as well as in the structure of our society.”⁹

The most recent United States Catholic Bishops Conference document concerning racism, the 2018 pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts*, updates the same need for both personal and structural change. It addresses more recent manifestations of racism, such as police shootings of unarmed African Americans, as well as nationalist ideologies that “are feeding the American public discourse with xenophobic rhetoric that instigates fear against foreigners, immigrants, and refugees.”¹⁰ It also includes sections dealing specifically with Native Americans, African Americans and Hispanics. It includes numerous calls for action to combat racism on national, diocesan and local levels.

III. The Response of the Society of the Divine Word

Arnold Janssen made it a policy in Steyl, as well as in other houses, that the neighboring poor should be helped in whatever way possible, especially with food. He insisted that the seminarians visit their poor neighbors in Steyl and meet with them to discuss their experiences. From the very beginning, the Steyl house was a multicultural group. Efforts were made to avoid tensions and nationalistic attitudes within the community.

⁷ <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/immigration/catholic-teaching-on-immigration-and-the-movement-of-peoples.cfm>

⁸ *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope. A Pastoral Letter Concerning Migration from the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States, 2003*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano.

⁹ *Brothers and Sisters to Us: Pastoral Statement on Racism, 1979*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

¹⁰ *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love, A Pastoral Letter Against Racism, 2018*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

As the Society grew, Arnold showed his concern for immigrants when he sent missionaries to the Americas to care for German immigrants. Responding to a German diocesan priest's request that the Society start a technical school near Chicago for young German immigrants, Arnold replied:

I am naturally averse to any extreme nationalism, but it does seem to me that it must be a challenge for us to foster our German nature, not exclusively, but sufficiently to ensure that it will be preserved from the danger of decline, and yet at the same time, where possible, to choose such forms as to prevent other nationalities from feeling themselves rejected.¹¹

Arnold saw outreach to the poor and the necessity to move beyond nationalism and ethnocentrism both in the community and in missionary work. These values were institutionalized in the constitutions from the early days to the present. Our current constitutions affirm these values, stating that with "open mind and deep respect for the religious traditions of peoples, we seek dialogue with all and present the good news of God's love to them. We show a special preference for the poor and oppressed" (c. 103), and we "commit ourselves to fostering unity and justice and to overcoming egoism and the abuse of power. We consider it our duty to promote justice according to the gospel in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed." (c. 112)

The 2006 General Chapter focused on how our *ad intra* life as members of the Society of the Divine Word is shaped by our 2000 General Chapter commitment to engage in mission as prophetic dialogue. The final 2006 chapter document noted that:

With our internationality we do have something important to contribute to mission – namely, the witness we give to the universality and openness to diversity of God's kingdom, which is the real source of hope for a world torn by cultural, ethnic and racial conflicts and violence.¹²

The Chapter then noted how this contribution to mission, as we engage in prophetic dialogue with people of other cultures, "requires a dying to ethnocentrism and racism and a passing over to a more universal spirit...an attitude that is open to diversity."¹³ In working toward unity in a divided world, we must first "recognize the danger of ethnocentrism, racism and consumerism that looms large in our community life."¹⁴

In response to a Chapter recommendation, the Generalate later published *Guidelines for SVD Ministry with Migrants and Refugees*, which includes a snapshot of statistics, reviews church teaching and offers general guidelines for our involvement to be adapted at the local level.¹⁵

¹¹ *Justice, Peace, and Integrity of Creation and Our Founding Generation*, 2018, Generalate (electronic) Publication, pp. 35-36.

¹² *In Dialogue with the Word* No. 6 - September 2006, Documents of the XVI General Chapter SVD 2006, Presentation.

¹³ *Ibid.*, #26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, #37.

¹⁵ *In Dialogue with the Word* No. 12 - October 2012, Guidelines for SVD Ministry with Migrants and Refugees.

Among the ten *ad extra* “Congregational Directions” listed by the 2012 General Chapter:

- **#6 *Indigenous and Ethnic Communities*** focuses on the Society’s “long-standing tradition of involvement in specialized ministries among indigenous communities, ethnic minorities and multicultural parishes” calling for evaluating, planning and implementing programs dealing with our pastoral responses, cultural identity, human rights, affirmative action and other aspects.
- **#7 *Migration*** notes “the increasing volume of internal and external free and forced displacement of individuals and groups” and calls for an evaluation and plan for our work “among refugees and migrants, separated and broken families, the displaced, the undocumented and victims of human trafficking.”

The *ad intra* Congregation Direction concerning community (#2) noted that “tensions and conflicts inevitably arise among confreres due to generational gaps, racism, ethnocentrism, personality differences and stereotyping” hinder our attempts to form truly intercultural communities, calling for ongoing formation to address these concerns.¹⁶

The General Chapter of 2018 committed us “to recognize and to work for the transformation of the various structural systems of injustice in society which lead to the problems afflicting migrants, refugees, the marginalized and undocumented.”¹⁷ It also recommended that “the Generalate encourage provinces, regions and missions to appoint more confreres for the migrant and refugee apostolate.”¹⁸

IV. Chicago Province and North American Response

The apostolic priorities of the Chicago Province and the Divine Word Missionaries throughout North America have a long history of solidarity with peoples who have been oppressed and marginalized because of racism, as well as immigrants and refugees.

Shortly after their arrival in the United States, the German missionaries saw that the African-American population throughout the South presented a true mission field with a great need for evangelization. St. Arnold concurred, and after a failed attempt to start a mission in Merigold, Mississippi, the first African-American mission was established in 1906 in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Along with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters who opened schools in the parishes, Divine Word Missionaries stood up against the racist attitudes which resisted any attempts to educate Black children.

Together, Divine Word Missionaries and Holy Spirit Sisters stood up against the racism in the Catholic Church, which often had parishes and pastors that segregated and treated African Americans as second-class members. As the Black apostolate grew in the South, the SVD garnered a reputation of service in the Black Catholic community.

¹⁶ *In Dialogue with the Word* No. 11 - September 2012, Documents of the 17th General Chapter SVD 2012.

¹⁷ *In Word and Deed* No. 6 - August 2018, Documents of the 18th General Chapter SVD 2018, #43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Recommendation 2.1.1. which reconfirmed/ revised recommendations of the 2006 and 2012 Chapters.

Bishops invited Divine Word Missionaries to northern cities as the migration of African Americans grew in the mid-20th century.

In the face of racist opposition within the church, the Society also insisted on the rightness and the need for Black clergy. After opening a high school seminary in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1920, St. Augustine's Seminary opened in 1923 in the more Catholic area of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi.

The Society of the Divine Word can be proud of its imperfect yet prophetic history of resisting racism in the United States. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2018 pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts* praises the Society: "We acknowledge with gratitude the religious orders whose charism embodied evangelizing and caring for those who were marginalized and unwelcomed. We recall the bold witness of the Divine Word Missionaries..."¹⁹ The Divine Word identity in North America is intrinsically tied to African American Catholic history.

The first Divine Word Missionary to the United States, Brother Wendelin Meyer, arrived in 1895 with the intention to connect with German immigrants through the sale of Steyl's various publications. The spiritual care of German immigrants was seen as part of the Society's mission to the United States, as well as to South America where many German people had migrated. Outreach to immigrants and minorities was a concern from the earliest days of the Society in the Americas.

The Society took over the St. Francis Xavier Mission for Japanese immigrants in San Francisco in 1925. During World War II when Japanese Americans were sent to detention camps, the Divine Word Missionaries stationed there went with them.

Later in the 20th century, as the Hispanic immigrant population in the United States grew, Divine Word Missionaries took on Spanish-speaking parishes or served the Hispanic populations within parishes. These parishes worked to defend the rights of Hispanic immigrants, especially those without documentation. The Latinx population has experienced a rise in racist hatred in recent years, stirred up by the anti-immigrant rhetoric of some politicians. The Society continues to stand with them, caring not only for their pastoral needs but also their legal, medical and social needs as well.

With the huge influx of Vietnamese refugees following the end of the Vietnam War, many young men joined the Society. This enabled the Society to serve the Catholic Vietnamese immigrant population as well, primarily through Vietnamese parishes or multicultural parishes with a significant Vietnamese presence.

Over the years, as demographics shifted, other immigrant and ethnic groups also have been served by Divine Word Missionaries, many of whom were facing outright racism and marginalization. Rooted in a long history of serving the African American and immigrant communities, the Society continues to stand in solidarity with those facing racism, discrimination and marginalization in the North American context.

¹⁹ *Open Wide Our Hearts*, p. 14.