

DIALOGUE ON FAITH AND RACE

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BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
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SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TEXT

At the end of our last session, we touched briefly on the themes of freedom and oppression. We now want to continue that conversation by exploring how we can most effectively struggle for freedom from racial oppression.

Racist attitudes, ideas, policies, and structures appear to flourish in an environment where the freedom to engage in self-interested competition against others is encouraged. If this is true, then overcoming racism may require us to rethink the relationship between freedom and self-interest. Is society merely an arena of self-interested competition for scarce resources? Does freedom simply entail the competitive pursuit of one's wants and needs, or the wants and needs of one's group, within such an arena? Or, can society be conceived as an interdependent social body in which every individual and group derives their well-being from the well-being of the whole? If so, should we not be concerned with the freedom of every individual and group to realize their latent potential to contribute to the well-being of the entire social body? If we accept the latter, then we can recognize that no individual or group is truly free unless all individuals and groups are also free.

As people of faith, we can also recognize that true freedom entails following the teachings of God, which liberate us from impulses and appetites of our lower nature, and thus enable us to develop our latent spiritual potential. These teachings include principles that govern how to interact with others, including cooperation and harmony between diverse ideas and people, as well as a willingness to sacrifice that which is lower for a higher cause. This is the source of true freedom – the source of human nobility, dignity, and honor.

The struggle for liberation, then, requires us to reflect on two essential questions: Who are we now? And, who do we aspire to become? Reflecting on the first question requires us to understand why myriad expressions of injustice and oppression exist—where they came from, how they evolved, how they function today, and how this limits the freedom of individuals and communities to develop their latent potentialities. Reflecting on the second question requires us to consider the nature of those potentialities and the processes by which they can become manifest.

Developing an adequate understanding of who we are and what we aspire to become may also require development of more adequate language through which we can explore and express these things. For instance, though we need language that deepens our understanding of prevalent relations of power and domination, we also need language that enables us to explore and create the healthy and mature social relations we aspire to bring into being.

Questions:

- How might we articulate the relationship between acute forms of oppression, such as racism, and generalized forms of oppression, such as materialism? Can a language of transformative social change encompass both without negating either?
- Many contemporary social systems embody oppressive structures that have been consolidated over decades or centuries. Certain aspects of the prevailing global market system are one example. Modern life often requires us to participate in such systems, to some degree, for our sustenance, our livelihoods, our education, and so forth. Is it possible to do so without becoming associated, to some degree, with the oppression of others? In this regard, how might a binary “us” versus “them” conception of oppressors and oppressed limit the ways we understand and pursue social justice? How might we move beyond these binary categories as we develop a more nuanced language of transformative social change?

- How can we begin to develop language, concepts, and vision that enable us to construct the world we want to live in—rather than simply describe or analyze the world we currently live in? How can this emerge from an acknowledgement of our common humanity, and our inherent dignity or nobility, rather than our current conditions of oppression?
- Thinking beyond the language we employ as we struggle for social change, what is the relationship between the ends we aspire to and the means by which we struggle for those ends?
- Where can we find examples of people seeking to overcome oppression through constructive means of social transformation? What can we learn from those experiences? Can those experiences be understood in terms of underlying spiritual principles that can be applied more broadly? If so, what might some of those principles be?