

# Restorative Approaches in a Time of Racial Reckoning

## Overview

Restorative justice is a principled approach to justice that emphasizes living in right relationship with one another. It is an approach that resonates deeply with Gospel values and Catholic Social Teaching.

Wherever human dignity and relationships are violated by harm or injustice, we are called to pursue a justice that **upholds human dignity, builds relationships, seeks healing, and enables transformation** within individuals, communities, and social systems.

**Amid a national reckoning on racial injustice — following the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others — restorative justice principles and practices offer healing ways of addressing the deep harms of racial oppression and transforming the broken systems which give them rise.**

## Restorative Justice Asks:

*Who has been harmed?*

*What are their needs?*

*Whose obligations are these?*

*Who has a stake in this situation?*

*What are the causes?*

*What is the appropriate process to make things right?*

These questions create a framework for responding to racial injustice that can lead to accountability, truth-telling, and transformation.

## Historical Harms and Modern Injustices

### Enslavement

"The greatest evil of American slavery was not involuntary servitude but rather the **narrative of racial differences** we created to legitimate slavery."<sup>1</sup>

### 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment and Convict Leasing

"After the Civil War, slavery persisted in the form of convict leasing, a system in which Southern states leased prisoners to private railways, mines, and large plantations... The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1865, prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude, but **explicitly exempted those convicted of crime.**"<sup>2</sup>

### Segregation/Jim Crow

"The segregation and disenfranchisement laws known as 'Jim Crow' represented a **formal, codified system of racial apartheid** that dominated the American South for three quarters of a century beginning in the 1890s."<sup>3</sup>

### War on Drugs

"The drug war has produced **profoundly unequal outcomes across racial groups**, manifested through racial discrimination by law enforcement and disproportionate drug war misery suffered by communities of color."<sup>4</sup>

### Mass Incarceration

"Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a **tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race**... Today there are more African-Americans under correctional control — in prison or jail, on probation or parole — than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began."<sup>5</sup>

# The Church Speaks

Over the last decade, Catholic Mobilizing Network's advocacy toward ending the death penalty has revealed the institutionalized racism and discrimination rampant in the U.S. criminal legal system, which has resulted in the overincarceration of Black and Brown people — including on death row. Misuse and abuse of power perpetuate racial injustice and deny human beings of their God-given dignity.

As a community of believers, we are called to engage in racial justice work with a spirit of truth-telling and a commitment to right relationship.

**"Truth, in fact, is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy. All three together are essential to building peace; each, moreover, prevents the other from being altered..."**

**Every act of violence committed against a human being is A wound in humanity's flesh; every violent death diminishes us as people... Violence leads to more violence, hatred to more hatred, death to more death.**

**We must break this cycle which seems inescapable."**  
(Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*)

**"To do justice requires an honest acknowledgment of our failures and the restoring of right relationships between us..."**

**To press forward without fear means 'to walk humbly with God' in rebuilding our relationships, healing our communities, and working to shape our policies and institutions toward the good of all, as missionary disciples." (USCCB, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*)**

1. Strang, Dean A. "Bryan Stevenson Brings Light to Our Criminal Justice System's Darkest Corners." *Progressive.org*, 28 Dec. 2015, [progressive.org/magazine/bryan-stevenson-brings-light-criminal-justice-system-s-darkest-corners/](http://progressive.org/magazine/bryan-stevenson-brings-light-criminal-justice-system-s-darkest-corners/).

2. "Convict Leasing." Equal Justice Initiative, 11 Nov. 2019, [eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing/](http://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing/).

3. "Jim Crow Laws." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/).

4. "Race and the Drug War." Drug Policy Alliance, [drugpolicy.org/issues/race-and-drug-war](http://drugpolicy.org/issues/race-and-drug-war).

5. Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2020.

6. Pope Francis. "Fratelli Tutti." *The Holy See*, 3 Oct. 2020, [www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)

7. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*. Nov. 2018. Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church. Web. 23 Feb. 2021.

## Possible Next Steps for Ministry

### Learn

- Read the *Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice* by Fania E. Davis and *Colorizing Restorative Justice: Voicing Our Realities*, edited by Edward C. Valandra, Wanbli Wapáha Hokšila.
- Watch CMN's video, "Top 5 Lessons from the Pastoral Letter Against Racism" ([catholicmobilizing.org/pastoral-letter-video](http://catholicmobilizing.org/pastoral-letter-video)).
- Host, participate in, and commit to ongoing anti-racism training.

### Listen

- Prioritize inclusive leadership that shapes concrete behavioral and policy changes in support of accountability and healing.
- Build relationships and communities that honor human dignity through story-sharing.

### Encounter

- Create spaces of healing and accountability to process internalized and structural racism in our respective lives and communities.
- Seek out meaningful partnerships with organizations and ministries led by people of color, and follow their leadership.

### Accompany

- Call for and support practices that divert people of color away from the criminal legal system, such as community conferencing and restorative practices in schools.
- Become involved with truth-telling and reconciliation processes at local and national levels.