

COLUMNISTS

Racism causes us all to lose

We have read lately about the burning of churches where Christians of African-American descent worship. As a Christian, I am shocked at the reality that hatred could be so intense as to drive people to destroy the places where some of us worship God. As a citizen of the United States I am disgusted that a nation founded on principles of inclusion, where so many came seeking religious freedom, would produce people capable of such hateful actions. And I am just plain sad about the continuing effects of racism all around us.

Today we see the evidence of racism everywhere we look, especially in some of the terrible patterns that have come to characterize life in this country. We see the tragedy of family breakdown, teenage pregnancy and debilitating poverty alongside excess wealth. We see the effects of crime, drugs, infant mortality and a pervasive hopelessness that leads to wasted, diminished lives. And now we witness violence against the churches where our Christian brothers and sisters pray to God and feed their faith.

In 1979 the U.S. bishops published a pastoral letter called "Brothers and Sisters to Us." In that letter the bishops denounce racism and label it a particularly vicious sin. The bishops tell us that racism "divides the human family, blots out the



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father. Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of race." (3)

In the moral vision of the U.S. bishops, racism cannot be tolerated because it violates the fundamental unity that God intended for the whole human race.

A friend of mine once pointed out that we can begin to understand the effects of racism if we remember what it feels like to be slighted or ignored, even if only slightly. Imagine what it does to someone who is deprived all the time, and not in small ways, but in ways that touch on what we need to live, like dignity and housing, employment and opportunity, respect and justice.

Racism separates us from one another

and it results in the diminishment of some of us, which is loss for all of us. Racism denies the vision of God for the whole human family and flies in the face of what we know to be the best image of what we can be.

What we read in Scripture, we already know in our deepest hearts: that "there does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). The true moral leaders of our time have led us forward with powerful words that confirm this profound sense of unity among all people. In her autobiography *The Long Loneliness*, for example, Dorothy Day wrote "I always felt the common unity of our humanity; the longing of the human heart is for this communion."

But racism denies this primary experience, which is present in all of us, and which is actually what we most desire. Racism emerges from a lie that lets us tell ourselves that we really are not connected, that some people really are not as deserving as we are — just because of their race. Racism appeals to all our insecurities and lets us think that by putting another down, I am raising myself up; by excluding someone else, I am making sure that "I and mine" will be long.

Racism is evil because of what it does to its victims. But racism is evil, too, be-

cause of what it does to its perpetrators. It denies a basic core impulse at the very heart of human existence, which is to belong to one another in unity. To use one of Pope John Paul II's favorite terms, we have in our hearts a deep longing for human *solidarity* in societies where justice is a possibility for all. Thus the U.S. bishops note that: "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." (10)

Discrimination on the basis of race keeps power in the hands of those who are already among the included. This goes on to create a cycle of escalating diminishment and exclusion. It prevents those who are excluded from claiming their rightful identities and their rightful places in the community. It maims and kills, and it does indeed wend its evil effects right into the hearts of those who perpetuate it.

We live in a country where racism breeds fear and hatred and violence. We live in a country where the hatred in hearts has cut at the heart of our deepest need, our loftiest inspiration.

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What is the loving thing to do?

"To downsize or not to downsize." That is the question on the minds of many business executives these days.

The "liberals" in the debate contend that to downsize is a mistake.

"Skilled workers are a company's most important asset," they argue. "If you fire people for short-term savings, you will regret it later when your business expands and you need them. Besides, if you let a lot of people go, your remaining workers will be demoralized and less loyal."

"Not so," say the "conservatives" on the issue. "Nothing motivates workers like the fear of losing their jobs. There is no such thing as loyalty in the marketplace anymore, and you're just a soft-hearted fool to act as if there is. Besides, a manager's duty is to the stockholders or owners of the company, not to the employees or the community or even society in general. The reason that the stock-



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BY GREGORY F. AUGUSTINE PIERCE

prices of companies that downsize rise is that the decision signals the stockholders that management is serious about running an efficient, lean-and-mean operation that will be more profitable."

"That may be true in the short term," the "liberals" answer, "but in the long run it is the firms that serve all their 'stakeholders' — not just their stockhold-

ers — that will prosper."

And so the debate goes.

"Downsizing is necessary for survival."

"No, downsizing will destroy everything."

My guess is that, as long as the debate remains on this level, it will continue for quite a while. Some companies will downsize and do very well, and people will point to them to prove their point. Other companies will decide not to downsize and will also do very well and the same thing will happen. Then, of course, some companies on both sides will do poorly and will also be used as arguments for the opposing viewpoint.

For the Christian, however, this level of discussion and decision-making is ultimately superficial and dissatisfying. Jesus' commandment was "to love," not "to make a profit" or even "to be successful." The true follower of Jesus is not inter-

ested in material goods, except as they are the means to the end of loving God and loving neighbor.

The Christian manager, faced with the question "to downsize or not to downsize," ought to answer with another question: "What, in this particular case, is the loving thing to do?" This does not mean that Christians need to be soft-hearted failures in the workplace. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is to be successful.

It does mean, however, that for the Christian, the decision is not made purely based on economic considerations. Justice, compassion, loyalty and, yes, even love must also be part of the equation. St. Augustine once said, "Love, and do what you will." To the Christian manager he might have said, "Love, and do what you can."

Pierce is co-publisher of ACTA Publications, Chicago.

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