

Plenary Session – November 2016 US Bishops General Assembly  
**Task Force to Promote Peace in Our Communities**

Remarks of Archbishop Wilton Gregory

**A. Introduction**

Thank you Archbishop Kurtz. Brothers, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today about a significant moment in the life of our country, and for our Church.

With continual tragedies occurring in every region of our nation, Archbishop Kurtz called for a National Day of Prayer on September 9th, the feast of St. Peter Claver, as one way to nurture open, honest and civil dialogue in our communities struggling with unprecedented tension and violence.

At the same time, he announced the formation of a special Task Force to help us as bishops understand, assess, and address the pervasive challenges associated with race relations in the United States. I was honored to be asked to serve as the Task Force's chair.

**Task Force Structure**

Archbishop Thomas Wenski, Bishop Shelton Fabre, Bishop John Ricard, and Bishop Jaime Soto served as bishop members of the Task Force.

Consultants – bishops and others – with relevant experience working through violence and discord in their local communities, participated in the work of the Task Force. You can see their names displayed on the screen.

## **National Day of Prayer**

In preparation for the National Day of Prayer for Peace in Our Communities on September 9, the Task Force and USCCB staff provided support and resources to bishops and dioceses:

1. A **prayer card**, created in English and Spanish, was made available for download on the USCCB website.

2. The Task Force suggested **various activities** for dioceses to observe the National Day of Prayer. These included:

- A diocesan Mass or special prayer service.
- A dedicated Rosary for peace in our communities with streaming and video components for the homebound and those unable to attend in person.
- Ringing local church bells at a designated time.
- Promotion of events and presentations that relate to issues of race, violence and community peace.
- Ongoing diocesan and community conversations on race.
- The USCCB's webpage on Racism was Also reworked, and now includes:
  - Church statements and background documents;
  - statements and letters from bishops;
  - prayer and liturgy resources;
  - teaching material;

- models and stories of communities coming together to address violence and build relationship;
- blog posts and relevant links.

## **Task Force Activities**

In addition to supporting and providing resources for the National Day of Prayer, the Task Force met by phone in early September and then in person on October 11 in St. Louis, Missouri, at Archbishop Carlson's kind invitation.

The in-person meeting included bishops and other consultants with direct experience working on reducing violence and fostering positive race relations. The focus of the session was to "size the problem," discuss current best practices, and begin to propose a way forward.

Some additional interviews were conducted after the meeting, focused particularly on young people and law enforcement.

## ***Listening Session***

We were blessed with candid conversation and frank dialogue among those present in St. Louis. Participants shared valuable insights into the nature of the challenges in our communities, as well as the need for healing and transformative responses for the Church and the wider community.

I'd like to share just a few of the themes that were discussed before we get into the Task Force's recommendations.

Many stressed that the work of the Task Force was a continuation of an ongoing conversation and not meant to provide one-time solutions. Sustained work on many levels (individual, shared and structural) is

necessary to face festering problems and move toward lasting solutions and healing.

Participants emphasized that race relations and combatting the evil of racism were central issues to be confronted and addressed. This point must not get lost, even as other concerns are addressed. “Class” distinctions were also discussed as a factor, in terms of family and poverty, as well as income inequality.

Difficulties related to our education systems, poverty, lack of jobs, domestic violence, gun violence, prisons and incarceration, and migration are all interrelated.

Many stressed that the Church must find its bold prophetic voice at this important time. We have an opportunity to convene and bring those with fresh insight into a dialogue. This is a moment to hear from young people, and foster real conversation about their experiences and prospects for the future.

We must also turn to prayer, which is a unique contribution of the faith community, one that is critical to the challenges we face.

Intentional efforts to encounter one another are vital to lasting solutions and healing.

Communities of faith bring a powerful healing influence. We must provide forums for individuals and families to speak their pain.

Some contributors shared remarkable models for tackling extremely challenging circumstances. One such effort brings gang members into a successful basketball outreach. Another initiative works with the city to support at-risk youth toward full-time employment.

As I mentioned, USCCB staff also conducted youth and law enforcement interviews.

### ***Youth-focused Interview***

A student who participated in demonstrations in both Ferguson and North Charleston was interviewed. He expressed alarm at the violence that has stricken his small southern hometown, and felt that the Church can facilitate honest dialogue, especially among young people, to listen to their concerns and issues.

### ***Law Enforcement Interviews***

Interviews with law enforcement officials stressed the interrelated causes of violence, including poverty, the educational system, and the trauma that many young people are experiencing.

Officials also stressed the need for empathy and compassion on the part of law enforcement, as well as the role of the Church in promoting dialogue and accountability.

### **Recommendations**

Based on all of the information we gathered, the Task Force made both local and national recommendations to Archbishop Kurtz and the Administrative Committee.

We must keep 3 points in mind about these recommendations as you hear them:

First, as I mentioned before, issues relating to race and violence were a central focus of the Task Force's mandate. Recommendations should be understood in this light.

Second, the work of the Task Force was completed and the recommendations formulated before the recent election.

Third, particularly with the suggestions at the national level, the recommendations do not provide extensive detail. This is by design. In many cases, we envision that the Conference Committees that are mentioned would be tasked with formulating concrete actions in accord with their mandates, strategic goals and expertise, in order to meet the spirit of the recommendations.

*With that said, the local recommendations are:*

1. **Prayer** – Prayer is essential. Bishops should initiate opportunities to pray for peace in their communities throughout the year – Masses, Rosaries, ecumenical and interfaith services, and so forth. These can be powerful moments for encounter in God’s grace and mercy.
2. **Local Dialogues** – Bishops would be well-served to convene members of the local community for conversations on race, violence, policing, incarceration, and related issues. Dialogues, hosted by the local bishop, can include affected communities, youth, members of faith communities, and law enforcement, among others and move toward concrete action.
3. **Parish-based and Diocesan Conversation and Training** –Clergy and staff will benefit from dialogue meant to explore how the Church can be even more active within communities that face tension and race-related strife. Bishops may wish to explore intercultural competence trainings for staff and parishioners.

4. **Opportunities for Encounter** – Bishops can foster opportunities for themselves, their clergy, and the faithful to see firsthand the challenges within their own and others’ communities.

5. **Catholic Campaign for Human Development** –The Catholic Campaign for Human Development helps to fund many groups that work to address, in constructive ways, concerns about race, poverty, housing, violence, education, policing, and much more. Bishops ought to look for ways to engage with local parishes, neighborhood organizations and members of affected communities in encouraging grassroots efforts aimed at community peace and understanding.

*The Task Force also provided the following **recommendations for the U.S. Bishops Conference** itself:*

1. **National Day of Prayer** – The National Day of Prayer for Peace in our Communities ought to be a standing, annual observance, supported by the relevant USCCB committees and staff departments and offices.

2. **Prayer Resources** – The relevant USCCB committees, departments and offices should regularly create and disseminate resources to assist in prayer for peace and racial harmony.

3. **Statement on Racism** – A statement from the full body of bishops on racism is increasingly important at this time. The Task Force has two recommendations in this regard:

- a. First, that the Administrative Committee of the USCCB, in collaboration with relevant standing committees, do all it can to expedite the drafting and approval of the statement on racism currently contemplated in the 2017-2020 Strategic Plan, given the urgency of the present moment;

- b. That the Conference President and relevant USCCB committees identify opportunities for a shorter-term statement on these issues, particularly in the context of post-election uncertainty and disaffection.

4. **Standing Committee Collaboration** – We called for additional collaboration between the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church and the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development toward fostering peace and combating racism.

5. **2017 Convocation** –The Convocation in July of 2017 presents a tremendous opportunity to address issues relating to race, and to provide resources to local communities. The Convocation program ought to reflect this topic in an intentional way.

6. **Catholic Campaign for Human Development** -- The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, mindful of its commitment to those who are marginalized in American society, should be tasked with identifying and funding new and innovative approaches that promote community development and peace. Special attention should be given to projects that directly involve the local dioceses in dialogue and civic engagement to foster healing and social solidarity.

## **Conclusion**

These recommendations are important, but certainly don't represent the full universe of possible activities. Many models can also be lifted up as we seek to address these complex problems, and ways to support bishops in this work must be sought and provided.

Brothers, there is much work to be done. The Church is uniquely situated to bring people together in honest dialogue to foster healing. As

bishops, we must recognize the significance of this moment and work with the faithful and affected communities toward lasting peace.

Thank you.