

# WITNESSES TO RACISM

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL INJUSTICE

Edited by Lois Prebil, osf

Office for Racial Justice  
Archdiocese of Chicago

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PUBLICATIONS

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## **Dedication**

**For all of us,  
in particular for our brothers and sisters of color,  
because of the ways  
we have been affected by  
racial injustice.**

## MESSAGE FROM FRANCIS CARDINAL GEORGE



Those who read my pastoral letter on racism, “Dwell in My Love,” often comment on the story I relate of my childhood and the first time I became aware of racism.

The incident that I recount was a defining moment in my becoming aware of the effect that racism has on all of us, both people of color and whites. Racism puts a wedge between us as members of the human family and “contradicts God’s will for our salvation.”

In their 1979 pastoral letter, “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops boldly said, “racism is a sin.” In the ensuing thirty years since that pastoral letter was written, racism continues to be a defining issue in our society, even as we become more aware of its insidious nature and realize that we must be proactive in addressing the sin of racism. We know that racism is not simply an individual problem; rather it is woven into the very fabric of our institutional and social structures.

I am grateful to those who have been involved in working to end the sin of racism and its effects in the institutions of the Archdiocese of Chicago, particularly the Office for Racial Justice, under the leadership of Sister Anita Baird, which

spearheads this initiative. Through the Workshops on Racism and Ethnic Sensitivity and other archdiocesan anti-racism initiatives, thousands of Catholics from across the archdiocese are working to transform our institutions. However, while much has been accomplished there is still much work to be done.

The reason I began my pastoral letter on racism with my own personal story is because I believe that one of the most powerful tools that can be used to break down the walls of prejudice and racism is through the sharing of our personal stories. Our human experiences of joy and pain, challenges and triumphs are common experiences and speak to our hearts, where transformation must first begin.

The stories in this little book are both painful and inspiring to read. The witness speakers all find strength in their Catholic faith and in the enduring fortitude of their ancestors, children and grandchildren. They share their stories with the hope that future generations will be spared the pain of racism. I am deeply grateful to them for inviting us

into their lives in such a personal and meaningful way. I hope that these stories of faith and endurance will be a source of inspiration for all of us as we work together to create a more racially just church and society in a civilization of love.

Let us pray that one day through the grace of God, our Father, the redeeming love of Christ, our Savior, and the power of the Holy Spirit, our Sanctifier, the world will truly be a place where people of every race, ethnicity and class will dwell together in God's infinite and universal love.

Sincerely yours in Christ,  
Francis Cardinal George, OMI  
Archbishop of Chicago

## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



The Archdiocese of Chicago has taken a somber look at racism as it affects the church and the surrounding community. Initially, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and then his successor, Francis Cardinal George, gave serious direction to provide learning experiences in racism and anti-racism for people of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Francis Cardinal George wrote a pastoral entitled, "Dwell in My Love," and he initiated the Office for Racial Justice in the Archdiocese. Sr. Anita Baird, DHM, is the founding Director of the office, which began in 2000.

In addition to other tasks of the Office for Racial Justice, several types of workshops are offered for specific groups in the Archdiocese. This book contains a small sampling of the witness talks given at Workshops on Racism and Ethnic Sensitivity. At these workshops, witness speakers from various cultures present their personal experiences of racism and then reflect on how these experiences shape their lives today. I am deeply grateful to those people who were willing to share their very personal stories. I ask you, dear reader, to treat them with respect. If, in response, you wish to share your story, please do so at the website for the Office for Racial Justice of the Archdiocese of Chicago, [dwellinmylove.org](http://dwellinmylove.org).

Lois Prebil, osf



## PREFACE



As the “vision speaker” at many of the Workshops on Racism and Ethnic Sensitivity in the Archdiocese of Chicago, I have been privileged to see lives transformed as whites and people of color struggle with the complexities of internalized racism and prejudice in their deep desire to grow in faith and in relationship with their sisters and brothers as members of the one body of Christ.

While getting at the root cause of racism is complex, we know that racism is not inborn but rather it is carefully taught and passed on from one generation to the next. Racism has the power to damage and scar one’s life, altering it forever. The personal healing of a soul scarred by the sin of internalized racism is a lifetime journey.

This very human and personal story is also a sacred one. In the workshops, thousands of people have come together from diverse backgrounds — white, black, Latino, Asian and Native American — to share their stories of race, place and grace, assured that they were in a safe environment where their stories would be heard and revered, a place where healing and reconciliation would begin.

As Director of the Office for Racial Justice, I am often



asked what motivates me to keep doing this work. What gives me hope? The answer is revealed in the beauty of a mural that is painted on the wall of the chapel in St. Sabina Church on the Southside of Chicago and reproduced on the cover of this book. It is by artist Samuel Akainyah and is titled, "The Last Supper to Be." Around the table are men, women and children from every tribe and nation (some famous and others not), and in the center is a very faint image of Jesus. When the mural was being painted I asked the pastor, Father Michael Pfleger, why the image of Jesus was so faint. The answer I received from Father Pfleger is what keeps me doing the work of racial justice: "Until everyone is welcome at the table, Jesus cannot come into the fullness of his glory."

Every time I enter the chapel at St. Sabina's and sit before that haunting image, I know that the work of combating racism is not in vain. I see the image of Jesus growing clearer each and every time another person is able to reclaim his or her human dignity, each and every time a story is told and a heart is

changed, each and every time the walls of prejudice and racism crumble a little more, bearing witness to the truth that at the banquet of the Lord there is room for all of God's children.

Sister Anita Baird, DHM

# WHAT HAPPENED THERE STILL HAUNTS ME

**Yolanda Gamboa**

*Yolanda Gamboa is an administrative assistant at an elementary school. She works with Hispanic families and does translation of school correspondence. She feels being bilingual is a gift to be shared. Yoli is committed to being a bridge between two cultures and to working to find common ground between the diverse ethnic groups. Yoli is proud of her two teenage children. She is a Girl Scout leader and is a witness speaker at the Workshops on Racism and Ethnic Sensitivity. She believes we are all called to work for justice.*

**A**t this time I would like to share some of my thoughts on what it means to be Hispanic and how my culture has brought me joy, sorrow, pain and strength. My father came to this country over forty-eight years ago. He is from Aguascalientes Ags, Mexico. He came here to visit, met my mother, fell in love and decided to stay here and have a family. As long as I can remember, my father worked two jobs to provide us with a Catholic school education. There are five of us — four girls and one boy. We were born and raised here, but my father gifted us with the opportunity to go to Mexico every other summer to visit with our grandparents and cousins. There we learned of the rich traditions and the history of our people, of our devotion to God, the importance of faith and ritual and of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Our father taught us to take pride in who we are. He gave us the opportunity to experience what it means to be Mexican. He would sit and read with us so we could learn to read and write in Spanish. When we were young we would recite the rosary as a family during the Novena to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. We also learned the importance of family as we ate our meals together. We felt comfortable and secure in who we were. We spoke Spanish to my father and English

to my mother. My mother is of Mexican descent, but she was born here. She speaks Spanish fluently. We practiced the customs and traditions of our culture in our home.

At the age of six I didn't see myself as being much different from other children around me. I remember we had to move from our old home on West Taylor Street because the area was changing from white and Hispanic to African-American and we were getting picked on all the time.

My parents knew it was time to move when a group of African-American kids pushed both my sisters and me into a large puddle of mud in an old empty lot. My parents wanted to provide us with a safe environment, so we moved into an all-white neighborhood. We were the first Mexican family on the block. I never thought of myself as different until others started telling me I was different. They would call my family "dirty Mexicans" and would tell us to go

back to Mexico.

This confused me, since I was born in America and considered this country my home. We went to the

Catholic school in our neighborhood. What happened there still haunts me.

Not only did the children pick on us but the nuns didn't like us either. They treated us as if we were different, and I couldn't figure out why. One time during recess my class was playing a game. I wanted to play and my classmates wouldn't let me. Sister asked me why. I told her it was because they

said I was a dirty Mexican. I will never forget her response, "Well, you are, aren't you?" She then made me go and sit in the classroom all by myself while everyone continued to play outside. There were several other incidents where the nuns would pick on us. One day my cousin came home from school and my aunt was so upset at what she saw. My cousin's face was bruised with fingerprints and his front

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lip was split. The sister had slapped him very hard because he didn't know an answer. My aunt could not speak English, so mother went to see the sister and told her that we had the same rights as everyone else to be there. Mother shook up sister, and that lessened the harsh treatment. But I could still tell they didn't like us. They were just less obvious after that.

So, at a young age I learned what it meant to be different. Even though I didn't feel different I was treated that way. I became a quiet child who stayed close to home. I would read a lot and spend a lot of time with my sisters. As I got older I continued to experience being seen as "Mexican." My sisters are lighter skinned than I, so they did not get picked on as much because they looked American.

After years of hard work my parents were able to purchase our first home in St. Rita of Cascia Parish. This is the Marquette Park area. This park played a big role during the Civil Rights movement. The Nazi headquarters was down the street near 67th and Western.

The mission of that community was to keep the park white. This is where Martin Luther King was struck in the head with a stone for holding a march and rally in the park. In the early 1980s, when we moved there, I decided to venture into the park. I still didn't see myself as different, yet others continued to do so. I remember the posters on park signs that had a skull and cross-bones on them saying, "Keep the Park White." One day while my sister and I were jogging in the park, she ran ahead of me because I was getting tired. Three guys on a bench barely noticed her as she ran by because of her light skin, but as I approached them they stood up and blocked my path. One asked me, "Where are your papers?" I said, "What papers?" "The ones that say you can come in this park, you S\_\_\_\_." I felt my blood boil. I started to walk, and they kept up with me. I said, "Oh, those kinds of papers. I thought you meant rolling papers. Those are more your style." They seemed shocked at what I said. I took off running and they yelled, "Yeah, keep running, you S\_\_\_\_." When I reached my sister I told her what had

happened. She said they didn't say a word to her. She didn't look different to them.

Through my working years I have also experienced being different. Not only am I a minority, but I am also a woman. I have found myself in a roomful of professionals who have challenged my abilities because I am a woman. I have attended many seminars in my field and have been the only Hispanic. I have not been openly welcomed into the groups that formed. I would spend a lot of time in my room. Then I realized that there is nothing wrong with me. I have the same right to be there. I know my capabilities, so I made up my mind to enter the room, greet others and ask if I might join them. Sometimes it works and other times it doesn't. But I have learned not to force the issue and try to get the best I can out of the seminars.

I am a manager of Data Services in the Telecommunications Department. I worked with an installation crew who thought I didn't know anything because I was not an installer. The joke around the

group was that the only thing I could teach them was to make tortillas. So whenever some of them would see me talking with someone they would clap their hands together as if they were making tortillas. Many times people judge you by appearance. What they see externally affects how they react internally. I have two small children who are very fair. They both have very light brown hair with glints of gold in it, and my daughter has light green eyes. They look white and not Hispanic. Many times I have had people ask me if they are my children. They expect me to have children with black hair.

With experiences like these, I often wonder, "Where do I belong?" When I go to Mexico, I am seen as an American. Yet when people see me here they see me as a Mexican. I would like to share a quote from the movie "Selena." Abraham Quintanilla describes what it means to be Mexican-American. He says:

*Being Mexican American is tough. Anglos jump all over you if you don't speak English perfectly.*

*Mexicans jump all over you if you don't speak Spanish perfectly. Our families have been here for centuries, and yet they treat us as if we just swam across the Rio Grande. We have to know about John Wayne and Pedro Infante. We've got to know about Frank Sinatra and Augustin Lara. We've got to know about Oprah and Cristina. Japanese Americans, Italian Americans, German Americans have their homelands on the other side of the ocean. Ours is right next door, and we have to prove to the Mexicans how Mexican we are and we have to prove to the Americans how American we are. We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans, both at the same time. It's exhausting! Nobody knows how tough it is to be Mexican-American!*

When I went to Mexico for a visit, I went souvenir shopping with my cousins. They told me not to open my mouth. I wondered why because I thought I spoke Spanish fluently. They said they

would do the talking because the vendors would hear me speak and jack up the prices. My own cousins saw me as an American because I wasn't born in Mexico.

These are some of many experiences that have made me a stronger person. I have experienced the love of God in my life. I have learned from Jesus that we are not different. God accepts us the way we are, but at the same time expects us to become the best we can be. Then I ask the question, "If God accepts us the way we are, why can't people do this?" The dominant culture thinks their way is the best, that all should conform to their ways — that we must give up the culture and history that make us who we are. As my father did, many Hispanics continue to come here, looking for something better and living faith-filled lives with their families. They are in a strange country where many don't understand or speak the language. But they are hard workers who continue the struggle for something better. My father has won many opportunities for us, but there is much work left to be done. I carry on with the struggle.

Other experiences with racism serve as a reminder that I am still different. When my son was in kindergarten, I was at a parent-teachers meeting. I do not live in the parish, but my children attend school there because my original parish no longer has an elementary school. The teacher said my son needed to improve his motor skills. She then asked if he had a two-wheeler, to which I replied, "No, but I was going to give him one for his birthday." She then said, "Well, he probably can't ride it or play outside." I asked her what she meant. She said, "Well, you do live east of St. Louis Avenue, don't you? It is not safe over there." I then realized what she meant. Pulaski Road has been the dividing line between the whites, Hispanics and African Americans. I became angry and responded, "If my children don't play outside it is because I do not allow them to play unsupervised. When I can watch them, they play outside. Yes, the neighborhood is changing, but my children are not prisoners in our home. I am a single parent and one day when I can afford to move west of Pulaski Road, I might do that."

She responded, "Well, I guess as long as the Hispanics move in we will still be safe." I was so angry. Why did she have to bring up where I live? How she was able to determine that my son had poor motor skills — because he can't ride a two-wheeler? And he can't ride a two-wheeler because of the neighborhood in which we live? It is hard to comprehend. What else was she saying? That if the neighborhood has blacks it will no longer be safe? I shared this experience with my family. They told me I should go to the principal, but I didn't. I let it go. I knew a better way of expressing it. Little did she know that she would become a part of my talk on racism!

Several years ago, we were celebrating Girl Scout Sunday at our parish. I prepared the girls and planned the liturgy. I had started to feel accepted by the parents of the girls. But when I walked into church before the Mass started I was greeted by cold stares. As I walked up and down the aisle, I greeted those sitting in the pews. Not one person responded. I could see by their stares that they were wondering, "Who

is she?" I felt my security somewhat shaken by their cold reception, but once again I reached deep inside and told myself, "You are doing fine. It will take time and there is hope." I must continue to move forward hoping their hearts will melt someday or that they can at least learn to say hello to a stranger. I truly believe there is hope. Our parish is now participating in these workshops on racism. And I was very happy to see the flyer that was distributed last Christmas. It was a bi-lingual announcement for the *Virgen De Guadalupe* celebration at the parish. The school has become very welcoming and diverse. I believe there are good people there. I have the pleasure of knowing and working with them. Good things are happening with God's help and the willingness of this faith community. A prayer at a time, one step at a time.

One final experience with racism really saddens my heart. Marquette Park has a large Arab-American

population. Their businesses line 63rd Street. I have known them to be a quiet people, hard workers that keep to themselves. They have a small mosque on 63rd and Homan Avenue. The Friday after Sept. 11th, the Southwest Organizing Project organized a group of neighborhood churches to go and stand out in front of their mosque to show unity with them. At twelve o'clock noon, while they were at prayer, a human chain was formed around the front of the building. This chain was made up of a diverse group of people of different races and religions, united in a common prayer for peace, not retaliation. When our Arab friends were finished with their prayer, they came out and joined hands in prayer with the rest of us — a prayer for peace and acceptance. It was a moving and inspirational moment. Those who were there felt they had taken a stand, wanting to make a difference. But where there is prayer and unity, evil lurks near by.

**The dominant culture thinks that we must give up the culture and history that make us who we are.**



Later that night someone broke into the mosque and destroyed it. They broke all the windows, destroyed their furniture and images and defaced the walls with senseless graffiti. It was heartbreaking. I drove past with my children and cried. I wanted them to learn from this. We are called to love one another, even when we don't always agree. I wanted them to see that evil is around. But I told them they are the future, they must work for change, but most importantly they must see beyond what a person looks like or where they come from — see who they are and what they have inside.

And that is why I share what my life experience has been and continues to be. I will not remain silent and accept the saying "That's the way it is." Once I was told, "Yoli, give it up. It's just the Hispanic's turn in the barrel. The Polish, the Irish and the Jews have all been there." My response to all of you is, "Why should anyone have a turn in the barrel?" The challenge is to change "the way it is."

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silent and accept  
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the way it is."**

Through these experiences I have learned to celebrate who I am. My parents have given me the strength and courage to go on and, most important, to never be ashamed of who I am or where I came from. The ability to overcome adversity is nurtured by humility, patience and compassion. These are gifts I have received from my parents, gifts I will give to my children. I am blessed in many ways. I am lucky to have been born and raised here in the United States; to have the gift of speaking two languages; to discover who I am and how I can help others. How can I make a difference? I see myself as a bridge builder. I am blessed to know both cultures.