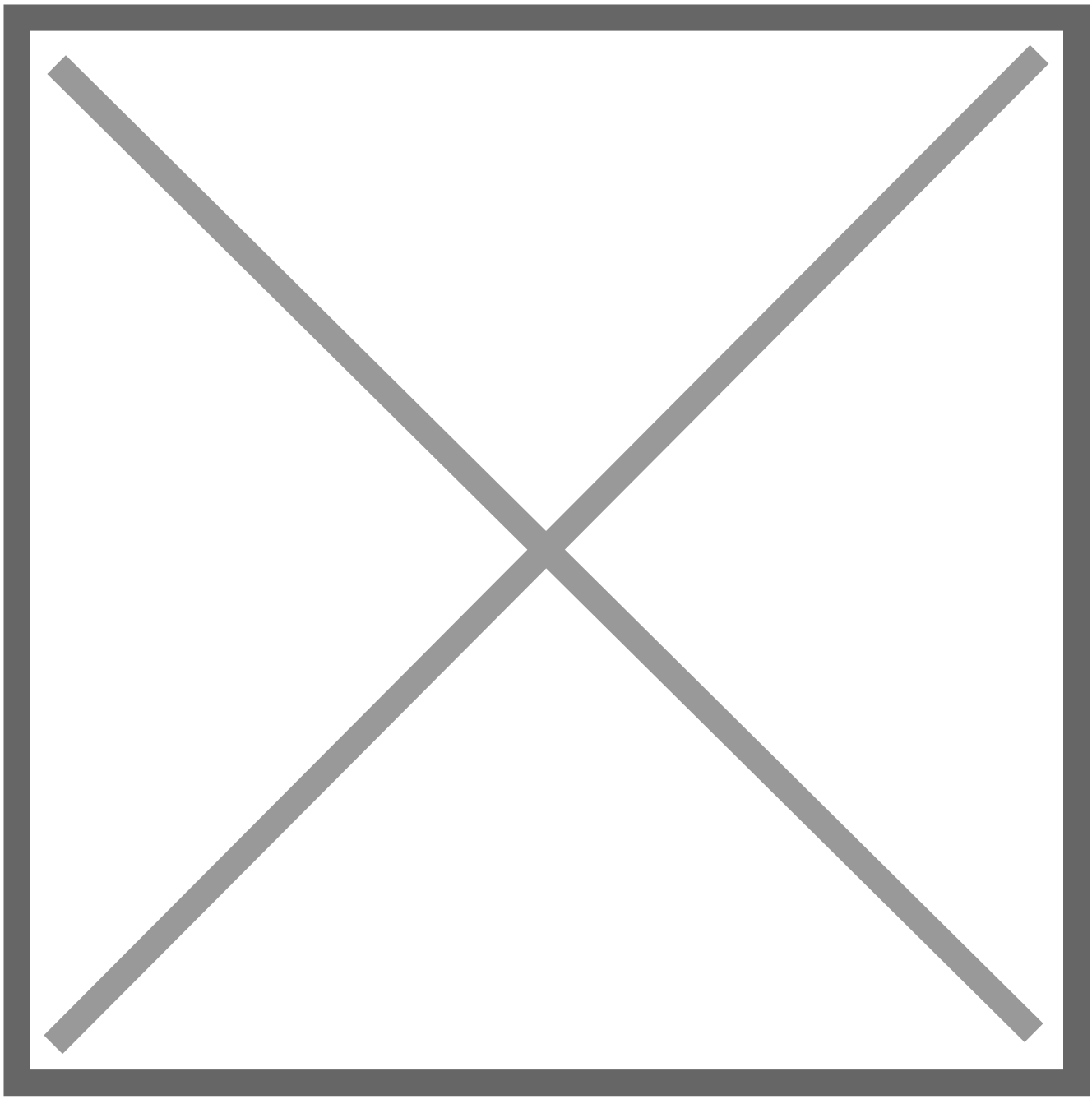
News



Bishop Daniel Garcia, then-bishop of Monterey, Calif., speaks during a Nov. 16, 2022, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. The U.S. bishops have named Garcia now bishop of Austin, Texas — as the first-ever chairman of their Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

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OSV News spoke with Bishop Daniel Garcia of Austin, Texas, moments after the Nov. 20 announcement of his appointment as the inaugural chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation.

The subcommittee, first launched in 2017 as the Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism, was approved as a permanent entity under its new name by the USCCB's administrative committee in September.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

OSV News: The permanent subcommittee's formal name is the "Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation." What does the name reveal about the vision and mission of the committee?

Garcia: The name is an acknowledgement that when people use the word "racism," for a lot of people, it's kind of a lightning rod: "What do you mean racism? I thought we'd done away with that," etc.

The acknowledgement is not to say there isn't racism. There still is racism in our country, in our church, in our world.

But the hope of the committee, as I see it, is trying to acknowledge there are differences that exist in regards to race and ethnicities. And what the church is trying to do is help us understand where there needs to be justice for all people.

Unfortunately, original sin has been with us from the beginning of time, and it has affected relationships and communities of color and of faith. The church is trying to acknowledge that we need to continue to work towards some aspect of equal justice among races.

And at the same time, where there have been profound hurt and wounds, we ask how the church and its members can help to create an environment of reconciliation — to provide moments where we can acknowledge our faults and at the same time, acknowledge God's mercy that we're called to give to each other.

Where are both our nation and our church at in terms of dismantling racism and healing its wounds?

I think as a nation, we see unfortunately the polarization of peoples, not just of color, but of different groups. I think that we have to acknowledge that some of that adversity, some of that polarization still exists, and it's very much alive and well.

So as the nation has tried to heal itself, we can't ignore the fact that much still needs to be done.

I think when you see and hear of particular events in our communities -- especially in our communities of color, where there have been no doubt profound hurt and pain, where there have been examples of violence -- we can't pretend that they don't exist. We need to be able to acknowledge it.

But at the same time, we have to be willing to enter into that breach and not run away from it, and not pretend that it doesn't exist, or for people to say, "Oh, no, we need to get beyond that."

No, we can't get beyond that until we begin to acknowledge the reality and the pain that has been there and is still there for many communities.

So I think one of the first things that needs to be done, if it hasn't already in some communities, is to ask, are we willing to listen to the communities and people who say to us, "I'm a victim of racism, I'm a victim of injustice," and allow people a forum to be able to express that?

Sometimes, for those of us who have not experienced racism, it's hard for us to hear it, because immediately there can be that aspect of wanting to become defensive or qualify the situation.

We need to be able to listen to our sisters and brothers speak about what their experience is. Until you walk in the shoes of someone who has experienced some kind of injustice in regards to race or inequality, you won't understand. It may not be your experience, it may not be mine; but it does belong to someone, and it is real.

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You've noted your own direct encounters with racism as a child, even within the church. What can you share about these experiences?

I grew up in a small town in central Texas that has deep roots of German, Czech, African American and Latino heritage. I went to Catholic school, and in my first year, primarily the students were, if you would, Anglo or Latino kids.

There was a family that was very close to our family. They had a young son and he wanted to go to the Catholic school, because they felt that would be a good education. I found out that the mother of that African American child had gone to the church asking that their son be enrolled. And the pastor, unfortunately, commented to the mother, "You know, this would not be a good place for your child." She said, "And what do you mean by that?" He said, "Well, because you're of a different race."

My mother told me of that experience of what the pastor of our church said to this African American mother. It was a wound because we played with each other. We shared food together. And to realize that this child now could not come because the church and its leadership at that time said this would not be a good place ...

When I was in high school, the church that I attended, a community with all Mexican or Mexican Americans, burned down in an electrical fire. The bishop at that time then made the decision to not allow the Mexican community to rebuild. Where there were two churches — one for the English-speaking, one for the Spanish-speaking — he wanted to bring them together in this small town of 5,000 people.

Well, we came together, but I remember vividly as a high school student knowing all of the kids that are in this Anglo community that I played sports with, that I went to school with — but when it came to the kiss of peace, the families that I knew, that I grew up with, that I played with, would not turn to us and extend the kiss of peace. That was Sunday morning, and then tomorrow I would go to school, and I'm playing with the same young people who are children of these parents and grandparents.

I remember that as a high school student. And I remember thinking, "How can this happen?"

In that community, if you were of a Latino or an African American family, you did not go to a certain section of that little town. The police would stop you: "What are you doing here?"

But that's how communities of color were treated in those particular days. Now, has that changed? Hopefully it has, in some respects.

I would like to think that the church doesn't have those moments, but let's be real. There are communities that are very ethnically diverse and racial diverse, that still at times — with functions, with celebrations — feel they're not being acknowledged or being welcomed.

Those are the kinds of experiences that shaped me of how I look at the world, that we're not called to live that way.

We're called to treat each other as brothers and sisters. Maybe in the past things have been the way they were, but we don't need to continue that. That's not how God is calling us to live.

My hope is that as a leader, as a shepherd, as a pastor all the years that I was, I can try to help us see how we have so much more in common than we are different.

How can the Catholic Church help those who hold or practice racist views to change?

I think our young people can help us. Many of the young people today did not grow up in a culture or society where only African Americans were allowed to sit up in the choir loft or the church, or another section of the restaurant.

I think what the church needs to do is acknowledge the effects of racism that still exist ... to be able to say that the way things were done back then, regardless of why they were done, they were not right. We need to own up to that.

I have always said that sometimes people don't mean to be racially offensive, but they don't realize sometimes their words and their actions are racially offensive ... So I sometimes think it's indirect acts, it's indirect words — how we use our words, how we use our expressions; how do we joke about each other?

If we can try to help people more cognizant of it, we ourselves can admit, "You know, maybe I at times have been a perpetrator of some racially offensive statements or actions or jokes."

And then we can ask God, who is so merciful, to forgive us: "Forgive me, and help me to be a better person. Help me not to continue or to build on some of those things that I just kind of say, 'Well, I'm only doing what's normally done.'" Well, no, just because it's normally done doesn't make it OK.

In the present day, with the immigration challenges that we're seeing throughout the country, one of the things to ask is, "Do you know a person of color or of a different race? Have you ever spoken to them? Or do you just kind of hear what people have written about it on a website?" I think when we begin to get to know people, we realize we are very much alike.

I've always said racism is taught. It's not something you're just "born with." You're taught to look at someone else as differently or as not as qualified or as equal to yourself.

I think it's when we get to know people that we break down those kinds of injustices and we realize how much alike we are.

Until we do that, we will see each other as the other. We will see each other as just a statistic.

And I think our Catholic Church and our teaching can make that bridge of what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was trying to say — that when we treat someone unjustly in one area, that we all suffer for it.

When we love each other, when I love someone, then we all benefit from that. When I hurt someone, we all suffer from how I hurt another person.

That's why the aspect of sin is not just personal. It's me and the person that I caused the hurt to. But it's also the people around us. That's why it's communal.

How do Catholic social teaching — and in civil society, diversity and equity (and inclusion) initiatives — help to counter the structural racism the U.S. bishops have identified?

We live in a society that — whether it's DEI, or opportunities for people of color to get admitted to a particular school — we immediately think that's such a negative thing. But we don't realize the roots of why there have been such imbalances.

I think Catholic social teaching asks, "Does everyone have an opportunity to have a seat at the table?"

For a long time, people of color were not allowed to have a seat at the table. Even when you look at priests — why is it that we don't have a lot of African American priests in some of our dioceses? Why is it that we don't have a lot of men of color as bishops and shepherds? It is important that leadership reflects the community that is in front of us. In some cases, unfortunately, people have not been given those opportunities.

Catholic social teaching continually reminds us that we're each created in the image and likeness of God. Some of the efforts of our civil society to find ways to make amends, to give people an equal opportunity at the table — are they all perfect? No, they're probably not. But I don't think it's good for us just to immediately shy away and say, "No, that's not going to work or that's not helpful." I think it gives us a lot of room for reflection.