

Appeal to the USCCB to incorporate the fullness of the American journey in their document: *A Path Toward Justice: A National Prayer Service Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America* in observance of the 250th Anniversary of the United States.

LETTER TO THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Dear Bishops and Staff,

Grace and peace in Christ.

We write with gratitude for the development of *A Path Toward Justice: A National Prayer Service Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America* in observance of the 250th Anniversary of the United States.

The prayer service is a thoughtful and inspiring resource that reflects the Church's commitment to welcoming immigrants, defending human dignity, and recognizing the many peoples whose faith, labor, sacrifices, and cultures have helped shape our nation. In a time marked by division and uncertainty, the document offers a hopeful vision rooted in the Gospel and in the Church's longstanding ministry of accompaniment, solidarity, and justice.

We are particularly grateful for the prayer service's recognition of immigrants and refugees, its acknowledgment of those who were forcibly brought to this land, its inclusion of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s prophetic witness, and its use of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, a hymn that has long expressed the faith, hope, and perseverance of Black Americans.

After prayerful reflection, however, many Catholic leaders have concluded that the prayer service presents an opportunity to more fully embody its own title: *Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America*.

Specifically, we believe the document can be strengthened by more explicitly recognizing three foundational experiences that have profoundly shaped the history and identity of the United States:

- The Indigenous peoples who first inhabited and cared for these lands and whose communities continue to enrich our nation today.**
- The millions of African men, women, and children who were forcibly brought to this country through slavery and whose descendants have contributed immeasurably to every aspect of American life.**

- The generations of immigrants and refugees who came seeking freedom, opportunity, safety, and a better future for their families.

We also believe the prayer service would benefit from additional prayers and reflections that acknowledge the enduring consequences of slavery, segregation, racial violence, forced displacement, cultural suppression, discrimination, and systemic injustice.

These recommendations are offered not as criticism but as an invitation to deepen an already strong resource.

Indeed, we are inspired by recent actions of the universal Church that call Catholics toward truth-telling, healing, and reconciliation.

In 2022, Pope Francis made a penitential pilgrimage to Canada and asked forgiveness of Indigenous peoples for the suffering caused by members of the Church, particularly in connection with residential and boarding school systems. His words challenged the Church to continue the difficult but necessary work of acknowledging painful truths and building relationships rooted in dignity, respect, and healing.

Likewise, Pope Leo XIV, in his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, acknowledged the Holy See's historical role in legitimizing slavery and asked forgiveness for the Church's failures to fully condemn that evil. Referring to slavery as "a wound in Christian memory," he called Catholics throughout the world to engage in honest remembrance, repentance, reconciliation, and renewed commitment to human dignity.

These acts of ecclesial humility remind us that remembering history is not about assigning guilt to present generations. Rather, it is about seeking truth, promoting healing, and ensuring that the dignity of every person is honored more fully in the future.

As our nation marks 250 years of history, we believe the Church has a unique opportunity to model this spirit of truth and reconciliation. By acknowledging the suffering and contributions of Indigenous peoples, African Americans, immigrants, and refugees, the prayer service can offer a fuller witness to the Gospel and a more complete vision of the American story.

The enclosed recommendations are respectfully offered in that spirit.

Thank you for your leadership, your pastoral care, and your ongoing commitment to migration ministry, racial justice, reconciliation, and the dignity of every human person.

May the Holy Spirit guide us all as we seek to become ever more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and ever more authentic builders of the Beloved Community.

Respectfully submitted,

**Catholic Leaders, Clergy, Religious, Educators, and Lay Faithful
Supporting Human Dignity, Racial Justice, Reconciliation, and the Common Good**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose

This proposal seeks to strengthen *A Path Toward Justice: A National Prayer Service Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America* by more fully recognizing the peoples whose experiences have shaped the United States and by expanding opportunities for prayer, healing, and reconciliation.

The recommendations build upon the existing strengths of the prayer service and remain fully consistent with Catholic Social Teaching, the pastoral mission of the Church, and the stated purpose of the document.

Key Recommendation One:

Explicit Recognition of Indigenous Peoples

The prayer service currently honors immigrants and acknowledges those who were forcibly brought to this land. We propose that it also explicitly recognize Indigenous peoples as the first peoples of these lands.

This recognition would include:

- Acknowledgment of Indigenous suffering through displacement, broken treaties, forced removals, cultural suppression, and boarding schools.**
 - Recognition of Indigenous resilience, faith, stewardship of creation, wisdom, leadership, and ongoing contributions to the nation.**
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Key Recommendation Two:

Explicit Recognition of African American Contributions

The prayer service acknowledges those who were forcibly brought to this land but does not explicitly recognize the immense contributions of African Americans to the development of the United States.

We propose language that acknowledges:

- The suffering of slavery.**
- The resilience and faith of African American communities.**

- Contributions to the nation's civic, economic, military, educational, artistic, cultural, and spiritual life.
 - The continuing witness of Black Americans in the struggle for justice and human dignity.
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Key Recommendation Three:

Expanded Prayers for Healing and Reconciliation

The proposal adds prayers addressing:

- Slavery
- Segregation
- Racial violence
- Forced displacement
- Cultural suppression
- Systemic racism
- Reconciliation among peoples

These additions are intended to strengthen the Church's ministry of healing and reconciliation.

Key Recommendation Four:

Alignment with Recent Church Teaching and Witness

The proposal draws inspiration from:

- Pope Francis' apology to Indigenous peoples.
- Pope Leo XIV's call for reconciliation and remembrance regarding slavery in *Magnifica Humanitas*.
- USCCB pastoral letters including *Brothers and Sisters to Us* and *Open Wide Our Hearts*.
- The witness of Black Catholic and Native Catholic ministries.

Conclusion

The title of the prayer service invites the Church to honor "the many journeys that shaped America."

We believe that journey includes:

- Indigenous peoples who first inhabited this land.**
- Those enslaved and their descendants.**
- Immigrants and refugees seeking freedom and opportunity.**
- All who continue the work of justice, healing, and reconciliation.**

These recommendations seek to help the prayer service more fully embody that vision and more completely reflect the Gospel's call to truth, justice, dignity, and beloved community.

THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

The recommendations contained in this proposal arise from a desire to strengthen an already compelling prayer service and to help it more fully reflect the breadth of the American experience through the lens of Catholic faith.

The proposed additions do not seek to change the prayer service's primary focus on migration, accompaniment, and human dignity. Rather, they seek to deepen its witness by more intentionally acknowledging the stories, sufferings, and contributions of Indigenous peoples and African Americans alongside those of immigrants and refugees.

The Church's ministry of reconciliation is rooted in truth. Throughout Scripture, God's people are repeatedly called to remember their history honestly, including both moments of grace and moments of failure. Such remembrance is not intended to produce shame but conversion. It is through truth that healing becomes possible and through healing that reconciliation becomes real.

As our nation approaches the 250th anniversary of its founding, the Church is uniquely positioned to model this sacred work of remembrance.

I. SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS

Created in the Image of God

The foundation of Catholic teaching on human dignity begins in Genesis:

"So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27)

Every person possesses an inherent dignity that is not earned, granted by government, determined by race, ethnicity, nationality, social status, or economic condition.

Human dignity comes from God alone.

The Church's concern for immigrants, Indigenous peoples, African Americans, refugees, and all marginalized communities flows directly from this foundational truth.

Remembering History as an Act of Faith

Throughout the Old Testament, God's people are repeatedly commanded to remember:

"Remember that you were once slaves in Egypt." (Deuteronomy 24:22)

Biblical memory is never merely historical. It is spiritual. Israel remembers its suffering not to dwell in bitterness but to deepen compassion for others.

Likewise, Christians are called to remember both grace and suffering in ways that lead to conversion, justice, and mercy.

The proposed additions invite such remembrance regarding Indigenous displacement, slavery, segregation, immigration, and racial injustice.

The Ministry of Reconciliation

Saint Paul writes:

"God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:18)

Reconciliation requires truth.

It requires listening.

It requires acknowledgment of wounds.

It requires commitment to a more just future.

The proposed additions seek to strengthen the prayer service's role as an instrument of reconciliation.

The Good Samaritan

In Luke 10, Jesus challenges us to cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, and social identity.

The Samaritan becomes neighbor not because of shared identity but because of compassion.

The Church's response to racial injustice, Indigenous suffering, and migration must be rooted in this same Gospel imperative.

The Judgment of Nations

Matthew 25 forms one of the principal texts of the prayer service.

"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

The Gospel invites Christians not only to welcome the stranger but also to recognize Christ in those whose dignity has been denied.

The suffering of Indigenous communities.

The suffering of enslaved peoples.

The suffering of migrants and refugees.

All become places where Christians encounter Christ himself.

II. CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Human Dignity

The Church teaches that every person is sacred.

Every social structure, law, institution, and policy must be evaluated according to whether it protects or undermines human dignity.

The proposed additions are rooted in this fundamental principle.

Solidarity

Solidarity is more than compassion. Solidarity means recognizing that we belong to one another.

As Pope Saint John Paul II taught: "We are all really responsible for all."

The prayer service already reflects solidarity with migrants.

The proposed additions broaden that solidarity to include Indigenous peoples and African Americans whose experiences remain central to the American story.

The Common Good

The common good requires truthful memory. A society cannot flourish while ignoring historical wounds that continue to shape present realities.

By creating space for prayerful remembrance and healing, the proposed additions serve the common good.

III. USCCB TEACHING

Brothers and Sisters to Us (1979)

The U.S. bishops declared: "Racism is a sin."

The pastoral letter recognized racism as both personal and institutional.

The proposed prayers regarding systemic racism build directly upon this teaching.

Open Wide Our Hearts (2018)

The bishops teach: "Racism arises when one either consciously or unconsciously holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior."

The document calls Catholics to conversion, encounter, education, and action.

The proposed additions seek to support precisely these goals.

IV. THE WITNESS OF BLACK CATHOLICS

Black Catholics have long challenged the Church to recognize both suffering and grace within the African American experience.

The National Black Catholic Congress and generations of Black Catholic leaders have reminded the Church that Black history is not merely a story of oppression.

It is also a story of resilience.

Faith.

Leadership.

Creativity.

Hope.

The proposed additions seek to acknowledge both realities.

V. THE WITNESS OF NATIVE CATHOLICS

Native Catholic ministries throughout the United States have invited the Church into deeper dialogue, healing, and reconciliation.

Indigenous Catholics have consistently offered gifts of spirituality, community, environmental stewardship, and reverence for creation.

At the same time, they have called attention to historical injustices that require acknowledgment and healing.

The proposed additions seek to honor both the suffering and the gifts of Indigenous peoples.

VI. THE WITNESS OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Pope Francis

In 2022, Pope Francis traveled to Canada and publicly apologized for the suffering inflicted upon Indigenous peoples through residential and boarding school systems.

His words represented an important act of ecclesial repentance and a call to continued healing.

Pope Leo XIV

In Magnifica Humanitas, Pope Leo XIV acknowledged the Church's historical failures regarding slavery and asked forgiveness for the ways in which Christian institutions sometimes contributed to or failed to oppose that evil.

His call for remembrance and reconciliation provides a powerful framework for this proposal.

VII. WHY THESE CHANGES MATTER

The prayer service already honors immigrants.

The proposed additions seek to ensure that the nation's 250th anniversary also remembers:

- The first peoples of this land.**
- Those brought here in chains.**
- Those who journeyed here seeking opportunity.**
- Those who continue to labor for justice and reconciliation.**

Together these stories form the larger American story.

Together they reveal both the wounds and the hopes of our nation.

Together they invite the Church to proclaim the Gospel more fully.

Indeed, we believe deeply that acknowledging these things reflects a commitment to the inclusivity that is our nation's greatest strength as much as it reflects our Catholic commitment to reconciliation and peace.

Conclusion

The Church has a unique vocation in moments of national remembrance.

Our role is not merely to celebrate. Our role is to remember truthfully. To pray honestly. To seek healing courageously. To reconcile faithfully. And to proclaim hope.

These proposed revisions are offered in that spirit.

May this prayer service help all who participate encounter one another as brothers and sisters, recognize Christ in one another, and continue the work of building a nation more fully reflective of the Kingdom of God.

DETAILED PROPOSED REVISIONS

Introduction

The following revisions are offered as additions to the existing text of *A Path Toward Justice: A National Prayer Service Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America*.

The recommendations are designed to preserve the integrity and focus of the original prayer service while more fully reflecting its stated purpose of honoring the many journeys that shaped America.

All proposed additions would appear in RED ITALICS in a final review version.

SECTION ONE

WORDS OF WELCOME

Existing Text

"...while acknowledging with humility the voices and lived experiences of those who were forcibly brought to this land."

Proposed Addition

We remember with gratitude and respect the Indigenous peoples who first inhabited these lands and whose communities cared for them across countless generations. We acknowledge with sorrow the suffering caused by displacement, broken treaties, forced removals, cultural suppression, and the separation of families. We give thanks for the enduring wisdom, resilience, faith, stewardship of creation, and contributions of Indigenous peoples, which continue to enrich our nation and challenge us to live in greater harmony with one another and with God's creation.

We also remember the millions of African men, women, and children who were violently separated from their homelands and brought to these shores through the transatlantic slave trade. We give thanks for their descendants whose faith, labor, sacrifice, resilience, creativity, leadership, military service, educational achievements, artistic contributions, and enduring hope have profoundly shaped the social, economic, civic, cultural, and spiritual life of our nation.

Their witness continues to challenge America to more fully realize its founding promise that all people are created equal and endowed by God with inherent dignity and worth.

Existing Text

"Gathered in prayer before our Heavenly Father..."

Proposed Addition

As we remember the many journeys that have shaped America, we also acknowledge the painful chapters of our history. We ask God for the courage to tell the truth about our past, the humility to learn from it, and the grace to build a future marked by justice, reconciliation, and peace.

SECTION TWO

HOMILY OR GUIDED REFLECTION

Optional Additional Reflection Themes

The organizers may wish to include reflection on the experiences of Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and their descendants, immigrants, refugees, and others whose journeys have shaped the nation.

Reflection may also incorporate themes of historical memory, reconciliation, healing, beloved community, and the Church's ministry of justice.

SECTION THREE

CALL TO ACTION

Existing Text

"[This is a sacred moment to prayerfully reflect on what we, as the Body of Christ, are called to do collectively...]"

Proposed Addition

As we celebrate our nation's 250th anniversary, let us commit ourselves not only to remembering history but also to learning from it.

May we confront honestly the enduring effects of slavery, segregation, racial violence, forced displacement, cultural destruction, discrimination, and unequal opportunity that continue to affect many communities today.

May we listen to the stories of Indigenous peoples, African Americans, immigrants, refugees, and all communities whose experiences challenge us to build a more just and compassionate society.

May we embrace the work of racial healing and reconciliation as an essential expression of Christian discipleship and a necessary step toward building the Beloved Community envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

SECTION FOUR

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Existing Text

"Let us now observe a moment of silence..."

Proposed Addition

As we enter this silence, let us remember the Indigenous peoples who first called this land home; those who endured forced removal, cultural suppression, violence, and injustice; those whose languages and traditions survived despite tremendous hardship; and those who continue to enrich our nation today.

Let us also remember those whose journey to America was not one of choice but of bondage; those who endured slavery, segregation, racial terror, exclusion, and discrimination; and all whose sacrifices helped shape the nation we celebrate today.

Optional Symbolic Action

Following the silence, a bell may be rung twenty-five times to symbolize the 250 years of our nation's history and to honor all who came seeking freedom, as well as those who were denied freedom.

SECTION FIVE

THE PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

New Section

ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

For Indigenous peoples throughout our nation, that their cultures, languages, traditions, and communities may continue to flourish and be honored as gifts to the human family, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For healing from the wounds caused by displacement, broken treaties, violence, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For truth, healing, and reconciliation regarding the legacy of Indigenous boarding schools and other historical injustices, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For Indigenous elders, leaders, educators, and spiritual guides who preserve traditions of wisdom, community, and care for creation, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For greater understanding, respect, and mutual flourishing among all peoples who share this land, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

New Section

ON RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

For the Church in the United States, that we may courageously confront the legacy of slavery and racism and become ever more faithful witnesses to Christ's ministry of reconciliation, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For healing from the wounds of slavery, segregation, racial violence, discrimination, and exclusion that continue to affect our nation, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For the dismantling of systemic racism wherever it exists in our institutions, public policies, economic systems, communities, and hearts, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For African American communities whose faith, resilience, sacrifice, and contributions have enriched our nation across generations, that their gifts may be recognized, honored, and celebrated, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For educators, clergy, civic leaders, and community organizers who labor for racial justice, healing, and reconciliation, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For our nation, that we may continue the unfinished work envisioned by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., becoming a society where every person is treated with dignity, respect, and equal opportunity as a child of God, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

For the grace to become one human family and one Body of Christ, united across racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences, we pray to the Lord.

R. Lord, hear our prayer.

SECTION SIX

CLOSING PRAYER

Existing Text

"We pray this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

Proposed Addition

We thank you for the gifts of Indigenous peoples, whose enduring relationship with this land reminds us of our responsibility to care for creation and to live in right relationship with one another.

We remember with sorrow the suffering caused by injustice, displacement, violence, cultural destruction, slavery, racism, prejudice, exclusion, and indifference.

Help us to recognize your image in every person and to honor the dignity you have bestowed upon all your children.

May we never forget the sacrifices and contributions of those whose labor, suffering, perseverance, faith, and hope helped build this nation, especially Indigenous peoples,

African Americans, immigrants, and refugees whose witness continues to call our country toward greater justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Grant that the next chapter of our nation's history may be marked by deeper understanding, greater equity, renewed solidarity, and a commitment to the common good that reflects the values of your Kingdom.

SECTION SEVEN

APPENDIX RECOMMENDATIONS

Additional Optional Resources

Organizers may wish to include excerpts from:

- **Pope Francis' apology to Indigenous peoples in Canada.**
- **Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*.**
- **USCCB pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us*.**
- **USCCB pastoral letter *Open Wide Our Hearts*.**
- **Statements from Native Catholic ministries.**
- **Statements from Black Catholic ministries and the National Black Catholic Congress.**

These resources can help deepen reflection on reconciliation, healing, and human dignity.

Conclusion: The proposed revisions seek to help the prayer service more fully embody its title: *Honoring the Many Journeys that Shaped America*

By remembering Indigenous peoples, African Americans, immigrants, refugees, and all who continue to labor for justice and reconciliation, the prayer service can offer a more complete witness to the Gospel and a more complete telling of the American story.