

# New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops



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## **An Open Letter: Children Come First** Tuesday, March 6, 2018

Yesterday, I received an open letter from some of our state legislators related to the support the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops continues to give to the NM HJR1 2018 (Land Grant Fund Distributions). Since the letter is directed to the Conference, we three undersigned Catholic bishops of New Mexico are responding today.

“ ‘Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth’ (1 Jn 3:18). These words of the Apostle John voice an imperative that no Christian may disregard. The seriousness with which the ‘beloved disciple’ hands down Jesus’ command to our own day is made even clearer by the contrast between the empty words so frequently on our lips and the concrete deeds against which we are called to measure ourselves.” This was the opening to the message from His Holiness Pope Francis on the First World Day of the Poor in November 2017.

New Mexico has the highest rate of children living in poverty and the highest rate of children suffering adverse childhood experiences in the United States. Our state has the resources to address these problems. The data speaks for itself. Numbers don’t lie. The condition of our children has raised the level of urgency; we must not only speak, but act. The status quo yields traumatic and inexcusable inequities, especially for young children of color. No one individual has been accused of racism. Rather, we’ve highlighted deep flaws in a system in dire need of substantial reforms. Pope Francis states, “We are called, then, to draw near to the poor, to encounter them, to meet their gaze, to embrace them and to let them feel the warmth of love that breaks through their solitude. Their outstretched hand is also an invitation to step out of our certainties and comforts.”

Institutional or structural racism is constructed by policies and practices that, intentionally or not, produce the outcomes that place a racial group on an unlevel playing field. It is complex, and this structural racism took root long before our time. For example, the history of the Land Grant Permanent Fund is based in inequitable and unfair policy practices. The lands that generate the revenue for the Fund are lands seized from the Native Americans by using treaties that were facilitated under coercion and then violated after ratification. Later, under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Spanish or Mexican claims to the land were denied through legislative and judicial procedures. Land produces wealth, and whole groups of people were deprived of the ability to accumulate intergenerational wealth as their land was taken away. As a community, we have a unique opportunity to change inexcusable inequities in our state. The fact that 90 percent of Native

Americans and 83 percent of Hispanics are not proficient in reading at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level should be of the utmost concern for us all. The horrible irony is that many of the children impacted are descendants of people from whom the land was taken. Pope Francis states, “We may think of the poor simply as the beneficiaries of our occasional volunteer work, or of impromptu acts of generosity that appease our conscience. However good and useful such acts may be for making us sensitive to people’s needs and the injustices that are often their cause, they ought to lead to a true encounter with the poor and a sharing that becomes a way of life.”

In *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, the 1979 USCCB Pastoral Letter on Racism, the bishops state: “The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority. Members of both groups give unwitting approval by accepting things as they are. Perhaps no single individual is to blame. The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices. As our recent pastoral letter on moral values states: ‘The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not caused, least we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt in it.’ ”

We now have an opportunity to take an inward look to see how we can end systemic inequities that prevent our state from reaching its full potential. Together we must purge racism within our community; even the smallest component of racism is an offense against God. Racism is an affront to the dignity of the human person.

It is not enough to identify poverty and its impact on our community, all people of good will must act with urgency. Pope Francis speaks very clearly to this, “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’, without giving them the things needed for the body; what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead (First World Day of the Poor 2:5-6.14-17).”

On behalf of the children of New Mexico, we bishops are very appreciative some appropriations for early childhood programs have been made; however those appropriations hardly repair the 2008 recession cuts. When 100,000 children are eligible for home visiting, and only 4,500 are enrolled, that reality should be alarming to our legislators. This year, only \$1.5 million of “new money” was allocated to home visiting. Home visiting is the very instrument that brings stability and vibrancy to families and ends the cycle of poverty. Again, the words of Pope Francis, “The earliest community realized that being a disciple of Jesus meant demonstrating fraternity and solidarity, in obedience to the Master’s proclamation that the poor are *blessed* and *heirs* to the Kingdom of heaven (cf. *Mt* 5:3).”

For 15 years, Allen Sánchez, our advocate for the New Mexico Conference of Catholic Bishops, has served us and the Church well. Mr. Sánchez’ deep love for the Gospel, the Church and the people of God are shown through his dedicated ministry, and his extensive educational background which includes: BS Pastoral Studies College of Santa Fe, STB Theology Pontifical Gregorian University Rome, and MS Spirituality Pontifical Saint Thomas Aquinas University Rome.

Today’s unconscionable plight of our children has called for the Church to be a prophetic voice. God comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. In the words of Pope Francis, “If we want to

help change history and promote real development, we need to hear the cry of the poor and commit ourselves to ending their marginalization.”

We Catholic bishops of New Mexico respectfully request our elected officials keep their focus on the issue at hand: the plight of our children living in extreme poverty. We are grateful for our legislators’ open letter to us, and we pray they will leave no stone unturned as they transform their good will into action and provide for our children by passing HJR1 and bringing this vital issue to the voting public. That is what St. John meant in his first letter: we must "...not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth."

Respectfully yours in the Lord,

Most Reverend John C. Wester, Archbishop of Santa Fe

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú, Bishop of Diocese of Las Cruces

Most Reverend James S. Wall, Bishop of Diocese of Gallup--END