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Bishop Braxton's Statement on Paragraph 176 of Pope Leo XIV's First Encyclical Asks Forgiveness for the Catholic Church's Approval of the Enslavement of African People

Paragraph 176 tucked into the text of His Holiness, Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical, "Magnifica Humanitas," (Magnificent Humanity), asks forgiveness for the Catholic Church's approval of the enslavement of African People. Those who only skim papal documents could easily skim past the paragraph without grasping its landmark significance.

In the midst of his timely, extensive reflections on Artificial Intelligence and its potential for the good of humanity and its potential to bring about new forms of slavery, the pontiff formally apologizes for and, more importantly, asks forgiveness for the institutional Catholic Church's official approval of human slavery. This involved transporting of as many as 12 million chained free West African human beings in the Middle Passage across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas in subhuman conditions. They served as "beast of burden" on the plantations that created wealth for the landowners and disenfranchised a whole community of people with negative consequences lingering to modern times. (See Edward E. Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism.)

This formal apology and plea for forgiveness, which People of Color have urgently sought, is long overdue. It is important for African Americans, all Americans, and the people of Africa, the continent where the Catholic faith is growing faster than any place else. Hopefully, it is not too late for the pope's words to have a significant positive impact on the Church and the people of the United States.

Pope Leo writes, *"In the development of her doctrine, the Church has gradually come to a deeper awareness of the gravity of these issues. It is true that past events cannot be judged anachronistically, as though the moral criteria that matured over time had always been available. Yet neither can we deny or diminish the delay with which both society and the Church came to denounce the scourge of slavery."* (176) Many African and African American people may feel compelled to ask: Why is this extremely important statement inserted in a lengthy examination of the challenges posed by the brave new world of Artificial Intelligence running the risk of going unnoticed? Did Christianity's biblical belief that God is the creator of every human being and that, by the Incarnation of the Word of God, Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection brought salvation and redemption to all people not make it clear that there could be no moral justification for Christians to enslave other free human beings? Why did this essential Christian moral truth need centuries to "mature over time"? Why does this critical paragraph speak of "slavery" in a vacuum with no mention of Africa or African Americans?

The Holy Father continues, *"In antiquity and the Middle Ages many individuals and even ecclesiastical institutions had slaves. Already in the early modern period, the Apostolic See of Rome, responding to requests from Sovereigns, intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation, and, in certain cases, the enslavement of "infidels." It was only in the nineteenth century that a formal, absolute and universal condemnation of slavery was clearly articulated, notably under Pope Leo XIII."* (176) Some Catholic apologists argue that earlier popes condemned slavery as "the work of Satan" but with little impact.

Archbishop John Carroll, the first Bishop of Baltimore owned slaves on his plantation in Maryland during the years he served as bishop, until he died in 1815. When he established Georgetown University, he approved using slaves to erect campus buildings. Bishop Carroll informed The Holy See about the large number of enslaved people in his diocese. But the Vatican did not condemn the practice which was common among Catholics in the United States.

The Jesuits of the Maryland Province, which included Georgetown University, owned enslaved people until 1838. Georgetown College might not have survived without the money earned by their plantations and the eventual sale of 272 enslaved people to a plantation in Louisiana in one of the largest mass sale of human beings in American history. This history was all but forgotten until 2004 when the Georgetown Memory Project and the Jesuits began to identify more than 10,000 descendants of those who had been enslaved. In 2019, the GU272 Descendants Association, the President of the Jesuits Conference in the United States, and U.S. Provincials signed a joint memorandum of understanding to establish a $1 billion (*yet to be raised*) irrevocable trust and a Descendants Truth & Reconciliation Foundation, in order to help heal the wounds of this moral atrocity.

In 1857 Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Roger B. Taney, a devout Catholic who owned free human beings, wrote the infamous majority opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. He ruled that, since enslaved and free African Americans were not citizens of the United States, they could not sue in federal court, and that Congress had no constitutional authority to prohibit slavery in federal territories, since African Americans were "beings of an inferior order" with "no rights which the White man was bound to respect." Therefore, Dred Scott and his wife Harriet, enslaved human beings, were declared their "owner's" property even though they lived in the free state of Illinois. The Chief Justice may have thought the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision would end the national debate concerning slavery. But, in fact, it polarized the nation and led many Americans to question the credibility of the Supreme Court. The backlash strengthened the fledgling anti-slavery Republican Party, paving the way for Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860. Some historians argue it was a catalyst for the Civil War.

Unfortunately, the Vatican did not condemn the *Dred Scott* decision. At that time, the Holy See and the Bishops of the United States did not oppose the institution of slavery. Some Church leaders even

argued that earlier papal decrees allowed certain forms of slavery. The Church did not definitively condemn human slavery until Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *In Plurimis* in 1888.

In 1999, when St. John Paul II visited in St. Louis (where the *Dred Scott* case originated), he unambiguously condemned the *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. decision as a profound moral failure. In 2018, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in the Pastoral Letter, "Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love", condemned the *Dred Scott v. Sandford*. decision as "a flaw at the foundation of the country's relationship to People of Color, a shameful judicial milestone, and a tragic example of denying the dignity and value of every human person.

The Bishop of Rome concludes paragraph 176 writing, *"[T]here has been a continuous affirmation throughout history of the dignity of every human being, created in the image of God, even if it took eighteen centuries for its full incompatibility with slavery to be explicitly recognized. This constitutes a wound in Christian memory, one from which we cannot consider ourselves detached. It is impossible not to feel deep sorrow when contemplating the immense suffering and humiliation endured by so many in stark contrast to their immeasurable dignity as persons infinitely loved by the Lord. For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon."* (176) The Holy Father's own words force the reader to ask if the Church has actually affirmed through the centuries the dignity of every human being created in the image of God, how it is possible that it took one thousand eight hundred years for Church to recognize the obvious fact that human slavery was incompatible with these perennial truths? How is it possible that Roger Taney, a devout Catholic, could pen the words, African Americans were "beings of an inferior order"?

"For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon".(176) *Magnifica Humanitas* was signed on May 15th, the 135th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum,* Pope Leo XIII's rightly praised encyclical establishing modern Catholic social teachings in the midst of the Industrial Revolution. But what if Pope Leo XIII's 1888 Encyclical, *In Plurimis* had done more than condemning slavery as a violation of the Christian doctrine of the equality of all people? What if in 1878 at the beginning of his long pontificate, Leo XIII had forcefully condemned human slavery, decreed that any Catholic involved with the sin and heresy of slavery would be excommunicated, and, in the name of the Church, sincerely asked for forgiveness for the institutional Church's legitimization of slavery? What if Leo XIII had stressed these points throughout his pontificate and made it clear to the Bishops of the United States that as leaders of the Catholic Church, they were morally obliged to make these Catholic moral teachings forcefully clear to Catholic clergy, religious, and laity?

If Leo XIII had done that, perhaps Roger Taney, a Catholic with a deep understanding of the of Christ's teachings, would never have written his repulsive *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decisions. Perhaps the majority of Catholics would have vigorously opposed post-Civil War Jim Crow laws, racially segregated

neighborhoods, segregated Catholic parishes and schools, segregated orders of religious sisters, the exclusion of African Americans from diocesan seminaries, and from the priesthood and the episcopacy. They would have rejected unions led by Catholics that excluded People of Color, and segregated sports teams. If the moral truth that racial prejudice is a sin and a heresy had been consistently taught in Catholic Schools and preached effectively from the pulpits of Catholic churches, people would not have participated in "white flight" as soon as an African American family moved into their neighborhoods and Catholic legislators and judges would not have supported laws that prevented African Americans from exercising their right to vote, and so much more.

If that had happened, many African American people would have felt welcome in the Catholic Church rather than seeking their spiritual homes in Baptists churches and establishing the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Because of this painful history, when the question is asked, why are there so few African American Catholics, it must be acknowledged that the real question is how there can be so many. Of course, we must acknowledge that Pope Leo XIII was a man of his time and his vision allowed him to see only so far. However, what a difference it would have made for the descendants of enslaved people if Leo XIII could have seen much farther.

By engaging world of Silicon Valley and beyond in a serious conversation about Artificial Intelligence, the most astounding technological development in our time, Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical, "*Magnifica Humanitas*," is a bold effort to continue the mandate of the Second Vatican Council's *"*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et spes*). We hope and pray that those with eyes to see will see what the pontiff has written in paragraph 176 and grasp its far-reaching implications.

If the genealogical research of Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. is correct in suggesting that the ancestry of Pope Leo XIV reveals a diverse family tree which includes Haitian and Louisiana Creole People of Color, there is a familial link between him and the people about whom he writes in paragraph 176 of his important letter. This adds to the appreciation of African American Catholics to find this profoundly significant paragraph is such an unlikely text.