



June 11, 2020

The lives of Black people do matter. They matter profoundly, because God has created every human being in His beautiful image and likeness. Every person is of infinite value, so precious indeed, that Christ spent His life and offered His death for the eternal salvation of each individual member of the human race. This astonishing truth shines in stark and disturbing contrast with the evil history of slavery. For centuries, slave owners, slave traders and indeed, the whole political and economic system of our nation dehumanized, exploited, abused and killed people of color for an erroneous perception of a collective benefit. Each person has an inherent human dignity and can never be merely a means to an end. Our bloody Civil War, the share-cropping system, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, Jim Crow laws, public lynchings, segregation, the prejudice and violence against the Civil Rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the instances of racist police brutality, and the recent death of George Floyd, all point to a long history of struggle, violence, and suffering to overcome racism in our country and establish inherent human dignity.

In this moment of challenge and decision regarding race, a cacophony of voices and opinions have exploded. What are the lasting and transformative solutions? How do we get to the core of the matter? Laws may change for the better, police methods need to improve, institutional leaders need to examine how they lead and serve, but ultimately, hearts must be converted if we ever hope to eradicate racism from our midst in a lasting and peaceful way.

Because of our sinful and fallen human nature, a flawed, innate tendency in the human psyche often feels the need to define as “other,” some person or group that is different from us, someone whose humanity or even very existence needs to be diminished, mocked, excluded, or even eliminated. Think of Nazism and the Jewish people, the generic “enemy” during any war time, the native peoples of the Americas, the native peoples of Africa, the unborn child, or even the child in school who gets bullied and picked on for being different in some way. In sad, evil, and terrible ways, African Americans have suffered from this dynamic for centuries; such racism and exclusion, no matter the identity of the victim, is radically anti-Christian and stands in diametric opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A particular way to view the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ is His identification with the “other” and the “outcast.” In his trial and condemnation, Jesus becomes the criminal, the rejected one, the scapegoat, upon whom is cast the hatred, sin, and evil of humanity. By absorbing this violence, embracing this exclusion, offering pardon to His killers, taking upon Himself the entirety of prejudice, persecution, injustice, and sin, the Lord heals all of it in one mighty offering of self to the Father. By becoming the scapegoat Himself, Jesus provides the

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path to end all scapegoating. The arms of the cross symbolize the mighty embrace of God towards all of His children. By that embrace, no one is the “other”; no one is excluded or cast out. All are invited to embrace a new identity as children of God. The Church, formed from the Passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, is born as the reconciled communion of love, unity, and peace to which all people are invited. Indeed, “Catholic” means “universal.” Our very name implies a new humanity in which prejudice, violence, hatred, and racism have no place.

The sad history of racism in members of our society and our Church points to the challenging truth that the fullness of the Gospel still has not permeated through our institutions via our individual hearts. To the extent that violence, disrespect, prejudice, and exclusion of any kind still afflict us, to that degree we still require conversion. This current moment of protest will only bear lasting fruit if it is radically grounded in a vision of human dignity and nurtured by a spirit of reconciliation. To forgive and to seek forgiveness, in a spirit of love and prayer, will begin to heal our society and communities of the fear, prejudice, and hatred that still divide us, conflict us, and violate us. Imprisoned in Auschwitz, Saint Maximilian Kolbe urged his fellow prisoners to love and forgive the Nazis. “If we do not, we are no better than they.”

Forgiveness alone, however, is not enough. How do we build a culture of life, unity, love, justice, and peace? We need a public and flourishing morality to do so. Tolerance is not sufficient. I do not want simply to put up with people; I want to love them. I do not want to coexist with others. I want to be in communion with them. Such a vision demands a spiritual perspective. In his courageous leadership, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted the Scriptures and appealed to a Gospel of non-violence. The Freedom Riders sang religious spirituals as they marched. Read Dr. King’s “Letter from the Birmingham Jail”. We need this witness today. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching, with their emphasis on human dignity, rights and responsibilities, solidarity, the primacy of family and social bonds, the importance of work, a preferential option for the poor, and an integral ecology, are solid and transformative pillars upon which we can build a civilization of life and love. As Saint John Paul reminds us, the human person can only fully flourish in a society with a healthy public morality, a functional democracy, and an economy ordered to the good of everyone.

Most of our national Founders were deists; while not necessarily practicing Christians, they acknowledged the existence of God as a benevolent Providence from whom flowed the dignity of the human person and the inalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This shared conviction that God created the universe and invites humanity to order its affairs in a revealed morality is sorely lacking today. Tolerance and good will are thin fare to hold together a society which so absolutizes individual autonomy at the expense of the common good, and in many ways, has pushed religious values out of the public square. We sorely lack a common moral language even to discuss ethical issues.

In my ministry as a priest and bishop, I have been privileged to stand in many sacred places with suffering brothers and sisters whose very existence was marginal and fragile. I have been in the slums of Cite Soleil, a vast sea of human misery in Haiti, lived in a tough neighborhood in Gary, Indiana, and have visited men on death row. I have prayed outside abortion clinics while lives were being destroyed inside, worked in the Dominican Republic as a missionary, and witnessed gang killings up close in Milwaukee. These folks experienced poverty, violence, prejudice, and even death. In one way or another, they all experienced the sense of being outcast, devalued, ignored, and disregarded. Yet, in the midst of such marginalization, I experienced faith,

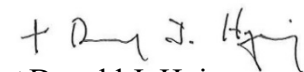
forgiveness, healing, and hope in very desperate situations. The truth of the Gospel demands us to go out in search of the lost, the marginalized, and the dehumanized and to proclaim the Good News of God's love and the inherent dignity of every person. The mercy and reconciliation of Christ is the only power that can heal an unjust world and a wounded heart.

Violence and lawlessness will not bring about the communion we need and seek. We must condemn as well the violence against protestors and police in these past weeks which has even led to several deaths. The looting, burning, vandalism, and disregard of law is not representative of the vast majority of the protestors, but nevertheless, should be a troubling concern for all. The attacks against human life and property are a violation of God's will for us as well.

What does this moment of protest and challenge ask of us as Christians? Certainly to pray for peace, justice, and reconciliation, for an end to violence and its causes. To fast and do penance for healing and forgiveness in the world. To study the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church where we will discover God's desire for us as a nation and a people. To take actions of mercy, forgiveness, service, and healing as best we can. To volunteer for service to marginalized and suffering people. To pray for our government leaders, health care workers, the police, the victims of injustice and violence, and all those who are suffering in any way right now. To examine our own hearts and ask the Lord to eradicate any prejudice, hatred, fear, or lack of forgiveness. To proclaim fearlessly Jesus Christ as the source and model of mercy and justice.

This Sunday, we celebrate the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, an opportune moment to ponder our communion in Jesus Christ, to remember that the Eucharist forms and feeds us as the Church, so that we may carry forth the love, mercy, peace, and forgiveness we experience in Mass to the world. We are sent forth to sanctify society so that our families, cities, nation, and indeed all of creation increasingly is conformed to the fullness of the Kingdom of God. I once was blessed to distribute communion at a World Youth Day Mass. Hundreds of people surrounded me, approaching to receive the Eucharistic Christ. Varying nationalities. Different races. All ages. Saints and sinners. Multiple languages. A sea of distinct experiences. All united in Christ. All bound in the love of God, poured out on the cross in the Blood of Jesus. This Paschal Banquet participates in and foreshadows the celestial Marriage Feast of the Lamb in the Kingdom of God, where all sin, hatred, division, and death will vanish forever. This love is the ultimate solution to our torment and division. This love never fails.

Sincerely in Christ,



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