

“How to Be Inoculated Against the Virus of Racism”
Homily for Prayer Service for Peace
April 10, 2021; St. Mary’s Cathedral

Introduction

In our fair city’s other official song (not Tony Bennett’s “I Left My Heart in San Francisco” – the better known one outside of our city limits – but the *other* one), we hear these opening lyrics:

San Francisco, open your Golden Gate
You’ll let no stranger wait outside your door
San Francisco, here is your wanderin’ one
Saying I’ll wander no more.

While the song goes on to narrate the exploits of the native San Franciscan who leaves town to wander about, only to return home and stay for good, we can also interpret it in another way, a way also very much in keeping with our city’s history and character.

A Place of Welcome

San Francisco has always been a major destination of immigration. We can think of the large waves of Irish and Italian immigrants who came here early on in our city’s history and contributed so much to the building up of our city’s infrastructure. The city now teams with immigrants from Mexico, Central America and other parts of Latin America seeking freedom from oppression and a better life.

The one constant of immigration in our city, though, from the very beginning down to the present time, is immigrants coming from China, whether originally to work on building the trans-continental railway, or now to work in the tech industry. And for quite some time our city has also been receiving immigrants from many other countries in Asia as well. Our city has always been known as a place that welcomes the foreigner, a place of harmonization of diverse cultures where all can be who they are and thrive in community with others. A place where no one has to wander anymore to find a welcoming and stable home.

That racial violence would rear its ugly head here, then – especially against Asians who have been such a vital part of this city’s life and culture from the beginning down to the present time – is very disturbing indeed. This alarming rise in racial violence, even here in San Francisco, justifies the words of Pope Francis on this topic just three weeks ago.

In a tweet last March 21st – the day the United Nations observes as International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – the Holy Father compared racism to a “virus” that doesn’t go away, but changes and adapts. He said: “Racism is a virus that quickly mutates and, instead of disappearing, goes into hiding, and lurks in waiting. Instances of racism continue to shame us, for they show that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think.”* Very sobering words indeed. We are not as accomplished as we thought when it comes to welcome, inclusion, and living in peace among a diverse population. What, then, are we to do?

We are finally getting some very welcome relief from the virus that is COVID-19. The plan for the rollout of the vaccines is working, people are being inoculated. But inoculation

* <https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/1373560009120944136>.

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doesn't kill the virus; rather, it prevents one from being harmed if exposed to the virus. And we still have more to learn about these vaccines, and we are learning more all the time: their effectiveness against variants, how long the inoculation will last and whether or not a booster shot will be needed later, whether one who has been inoculated can still spread the virus to others or not. The virus of racism is a lot like that: it never goes away, but there are ways to inoculate oneself against it, even if one has to be always vigilant to protect oneself from being infected. But what is our inoculation against racism?

The Inoculation

We need look no further than the passage from the Acts of the Apostles we just heard in our first reading to get a good start in answering that question. In its description of the life of the first Christian community, we heard: "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.... There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, ... and they were distributed to each according to need."

We see here the qualities that make such a peaceful and harmonious common life possible: each one looked out first and foremost for the good of the other, not what they were going to get out of it. Everyone shared generously, indeed, everything they had in order to contribute to the common good of the community. And the apostles were entrusted with the distribution of these goods, because they were worthy of the trust of the community members – as were the members themselves, in sharing generously of all they had. Everyone put the good of the other first, and that requires a lot of humility.

Compare this to the apostles before they were visited by the risen Christ. What controlled their attitude and behavior? Fear and doubt. The Gospel passage we heard proclaimed in our prayer service today is the one from which St. Thomas comes to be dubbed "the doubting Thomas," but it is clear from the various Gospel accounts of the post-resurrectional appearances of our Lord that all of the disciples doubted at first.

It was that encounter with the living, risen Christ that transformed them into messengers of ... what? Notice the mission that our Lord sends them on: "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them." It is a mission of forgiveness, a mission of mercy. Fear and doubt are transformed into courage and conviction, to spread God's mercy throughout the world. Fear and doubt result in violence; courage and conviction on behalf of mercy result in the qualities necessary for a diverse community to live in unity and peace.

Conclusion

To put it briefly, then, the inoculation against racism can be summed up in one word: virtue. These virtues are very clearly delineated in the readings from the Word of God that are prescribed for this Sunday that the Catholic Church names "Divine Mercy Sunday": generosity, selflessness, trust and trustworthiness, humility, courage, conviction, forgiveness, and, of course, mercy itself.

Let us, here in San Francisco, lead the way by example. Let us make our Golden Gate an authentic symbol of a city that will let no stranger wait outside its door, and where the wandering one will say, "I'll wander no more."