

June 8, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

If you want peace, work for justice.

-St. Pope Paul VI

Message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1972

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery

- Bob Marley

Redemption Song, 1980

“I can’t breathe!” were the last words of George Floyd before he was killed by asphyxiation under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020.

We feel horrified and outraged by this incident of brutality. But this was more than an incident, and those of us who are witnesses are not as innocent as we sometimes like to think. The fact that many racialized people, Indigenous people and women often feel unsafe, and need to be constantly alert for possible threats to them and to their loved ones means that “I can’t breathe” characterizes whole systems in our society and culture.

Activists, scholars, artists and prophets have come to recognize that policies and practices of colonization and domination over the centuries have led to today’s practices of discrimination, marginalization and exploitation, as well as to deep and intergenerational trauma for their survivors. Furthermore, land, resources and labour that have been taken from others without their consent have helped to build institutions from which we all profit. In the Society of Jesus, as with the rest of the Church in Canada, our Indigenous sisters and brothers have taught us how our involvement in residential schools, despite our desire to share the good news and to educate, drew us into becoming agents in an enterprise of colonization, assimilation and racism. Even with good will, our complicity in injustice is profound. We have learned that evil’s reach is far and deep, infiltrating even our most cherished intentions.

Yet Love reaches farther and deeper still. It offers many, many avenues for healing and for following in the transformative path of Jesus. If we gaze deeply into our mess, if we dare to touch the wounds, we find God there and we feel the power of the Risen Lord. Paul in Romans 8:22 writes, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in the pains of childbirth.” With the rest of creation, we too are seeking and hoping because our hearts tell us that despair is not the last word. The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, especially in the Meditation on the Two Standards, help us to see in Jesus the model of a non-discriminating, non-colonizing, mind and heart. In these days when many are screaming “I can’t breathe!”, we have celebrated Pentecost, the empowering breathing out of God who gives the gift of

breath and bold speech to those who had been choked and silenced with fear. The cries of “I can’t breathe!” and the alarm of young people for the social and ecological integrity of our common home are signs of the times through which God is speaking with us, inviting us into ever widening forms of unity. Jesus shows us the way of Love and the Spirit gives the power to walk it.

Pentecost continues. In the very midst of discrimination and fear, voices are being lifted, problems are being named, and respectful, reciprocal relations are being built. How can we be involved? I know that in your own context you can come up with many things that can express your concern and solidarity and that can contribute to better relations. In all of these things though I urge you to listen to these voices with active, non-judgmental listening. Let their stories affect you. Let them teach you. Listen also to your own inner responses with the same active non-judgmental ear and note how the Lord is working there to draw you forward into greater, deeper and more embracing Love. Our Province has developed resources that can help us to listen. Among these, our new province apostolic discernment document outlines the values that can orient our reflection and action. Further, the Jesuit Forum for Social Faith and Justice will soon be publishing a guide called, *Listening to Indigenous Voices: A Dialogue Guide to Right Relations*. The *Vivre Ensemble* project of the Centre justice et foi writes many analyses that demonstrate what empowered, non-colonizing thinking can look like. Canadian Jesuits International has developed an *Advocacy Formation Guide*.

The economist Barbara Ward once observed that every ancient wisdom and religion tell us the same thing: either we learn to love one another or we will die.

Let us look, let us see, let us feel, let us discern, let us learn, let us act, let us build better relations, and in all things, let us Love.

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam,



Erik Oland, S.J.