



This is the first year that Pittsburgh and all of Allegheny County is officially honoring Juneteenth (June 19) as a county holiday (it had been designated a state holiday earlier in Pennsylvania). It marks a holiday first celebrated in Texas, where on that date in 1865, in the aftermath of the Civil War, slaves were declared free under the terms of the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation. It is also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Liberation Day and Emancipation Day. To mark this new holiday, we invite all parishioners to reflect on the following article written last year by Fr. Matthew:

Toward a Catholic Understanding of the Phrase “Black Lives Matter”

By Fr. Matthew Hawkins

It is a curious thing that the cry “Black Lives Matter” is met with so much opposition and misunderstanding outside of African American communities. This cry means many different things to different people, but it is grounded in reality and in a specific and concrete history and in contemporary social experiences. These should not be misinterpreted or misunderstood.

The cry, “Black Lives Matter” is not a new cry that suddenly emerged in the past 10 years. It is a cry that is at least 400 years old, and has spanned many different stages of American history.

If a person understands the history and circumstances that have given rise to this cry, then they will not misinterpret it, they will not feel threatened by it, and they will not feel excluded from it. Properly understood, “Black Lives Matter” is an expression of fundamental Catholic values of family, community, universality, life, and faith.

Some may ask, “Why talk about black lives? Why not talk about all lives?” But to say “Black Lives Matter” is to say that “All Lives Matter,” including the lives of Black Americans that have been treated historically, and even today, as being expendable, disposable, and of little value.

It is the tradition of the Catholic faith that we experience the universal within the particular, and we participate in the global through the local. What does this mean?

It means that human beings who are part of a universal body, live within a particular society, culture, and period of history. This is as true for African Americans as it is for any other social and ethnic group. As Americans, we have no problem recognizing the importance of passing on Irish-American culture in raising children and strengthening communities; nor do we find it difficult to value and pass on Italian-American culture and heritage, or German-American culture and heritage, or Polish-American culture and heritage. Why should it be any different when it comes to the life-sustaining role of the preservation and transmission of African American culture and heritage to future generations in order to have strong and healthy families and communities?

One example of this is the traditional role that African American spirituals have played in strengthening and nurturing us through times of adversity, including the brutality of slavery, the oppression of forced racial segregation, two great migrations that have torn African American families asunder, and the confinement of blacks to Northern urban ghettos.

The Spirituals, much like the blues, as musical art forms have enabled generations of African Americans to enter into the suffering of the human condition and therein, find solidarity with all of humanity. They have kept us sane in the midst of adversity. They have kept us whole. They have given us wisdom. And they have introduced us to the Gospel.

Moreover, the Spirituals have brought sacred scripture to life within the peculiarity of the African American experience. To turn our backs on our culture and our heritage would be to turn our backs on life itself. This is as true for us as it is for any other culture or ethnicity.

For Black American Catholics, it is through the particularity of our cultural heritage that we enter into the universality of the traditions of the Catholic Church and the universality of all of humanity. No one has any reason to feel threatened by this. No one has any reason to feel excluded.

“But why,” some might ask, “do you say that your lives matter? What do you mean by this?”

When we say that our lives matter we are expressing the quintessential message of the Gospel of Life. For centuries, African American lives have been treated as though they did not matter. They were treated as though they were cheap and expendable. This was true under the regime of chattel slavery; it was true during the mass lynching of blacks in the post-civil war south, and in riots in the north to prevent racial integration. It was true for 100 years after emancipation and it was true when black soldiers were sent to the front lines of the battlefields to absorb the brunt of the casualties in times of war.

It has also been true under more recent policies of mass incarceration and disproportionate sentencing to capital punishment.

The cry that “Black Lives Matter” is a cry that comes from the Gospel of life and from a rejection of the notion that human beings should be treated as though they are mere objects that should be thrown away when their lives are no longer deemed to be “useful.”

It is a rejection of the idea that human life is something that should be disposable for social convenience.

We reject the notion that depopulation and termination of pregnancies are acceptable means for combating poverty.

We reject the notion that the use of violence and military action without exhausting efforts for peaceful resolution of conflicts should be the basis of foreign policy.

We reject the notion that the state execution of prisoners is an acceptable and effective way to deter crime and to protect human life.

We reject the notion that withdrawing ordinary means of life-sustaining care is an acceptable way to reduce the cost of health care.

Again and again, we respond to the culture of death by reasserting a culture of life.

We reject anything in our culture that cheapens human life and that desensitizes us to human suffering. This includes gratuitous violence in entertainment, misogynist treatment of women, and the plague of gunfire in our streets.

A Catholic understanding of the cry that “Black Lives Matter,” is a celebration of the value and dignity of human life from the point of conception until natural death.

Therefore, let no one misunderstand and misinterpret what we mean when we say “Black Lives Matter.” Let no one convince themselves that they should feel offended or excluded by a Catholic understanding of the term. This is a phrase that embraces and acknowledges the tradition and culture of African American communities for 400 years and that applies the timeless value of human life to the particularity of the African American experience today. It is a phrase that asserts the value of life that is too often missing in American popular culture.

Let this be a blessing to us, to our children, and to all of humanity. Black Lives Matter. Black Catholics Matter. All Human Life Matters. May God Bless You. (*June 30, 2020*)