Fr. Paulson Mundanmani’s reflection on on the difficult topic of racism and prejudice, whether overt or inadvertent... August 5. 2019

Dear friends,
We have had multiple mass shootings in our nation, one close to home in Gilroy. These are sad times.

What is more painful is a number of the shooters are young people in their early twenties. We have work to do. Let us pray that our young may find purpose and meaning in life.

That as a nation, we can rise above politics and self-interests, and do what is right.

In my last five years, many of you have asked me about the Caste System in India.

Let me describe that to you with a diagram. (See photo)

As you can see at the top of the pyramid is Brahmin (priests, academics). Now you know where I belong in the caste system... Ha ha. Not really. This is applied only to Hindu priests.

And then you have warriors, Kings followed by merchants and landowners. At the bottom of the caste system are commoners, peasants and servants.

In Hindu culture, Caste system was a way of maintaining order and smooth governance. Today the caste system is illegal. But the nation continues to be plagued by the vestiges of a system that was designed to discriminate.

Now, if you look at the diagram, you will see that below the pyramid, you have another major group known as Dalits or Untouchables. Gandhi would call them Harijans or “children of God.”

There are about 160 million Dalits in India. In Hinduism’s caste system, they are the lowest of the low, having been assigned at birth to their social status. The Dalits are considered "untouchable" because their status often doomed them to menial jobs that included handling human waste and animal carcasses.

It is estimated that of the 20 million Christians in India, that is, 2 percent of the population, nearly 70 percent of those Christians are Dalits. Interestingly, though they converted to Christianity, they continue to be referred to by their caste names.

Many studies have revealed that conversion to Christianity does not change the social condition of the Dalits. They continue to be poor, landless rural laborers under the thumb of landlords and moneylenders.

Is there racism in our church? Yes.

I know of situations where Caste or race has played a part in the choice of bishops and priests for dioceses and parishes.
Is there racism in our own parish? You will be the better judges. Fr. Brian Timoney has told me that 2 parishioners have spoken to him about how they have experienced racism right here in our parish. No one has told me.

In the last 10 years or so, there has been a heated debate on racism in our country. I have taken those discussions seriously on a personal level.

Have I myself made a racist comment in my life? Yes. Have I treated someone in a racist way? Have I made culturally insensitive remarks about others? Yes.

That is why the last ten years have been a learning experience for me. I have learned much over these years.

I have learned that sometimes what is not insensitive or racist from my perspective, is truly insensitive, racist for others. And that there is no need for me to offend others.

The church has been guilty more often, I want to say our leadership, including, me have been more guilty for our silence in the face of racism, bigotry, insensitivity and sometimes much more.

In this week’s epistle, the apostle Paul describes a radical alternative to every ugly manifestation of racism or “identity violence.” For those who follow Jesus, writes Paul, “there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11).

We can add our modern equivalents—no Iraqis or Iranians, no North Koreans or North Vietnamese, no blue bloods or blue collars, no imperialists or terrorists, no gays or straights.

We don’t need to succumb to race-baiting, to gay-bashing, to ethnic slurs and stereotypes.

The most important remark from Paul to the believers at Colossae is to see every person as a human being who bears “the image of its creator” (3:10).

And that is so important; “Imago Dei’ - image of God.
I feel strong about myself because I am made in God’s image. What does it mean by being made in the image of God?

It means that we possess incredible value, dignity and worth. Being made in the image of God makes ALL human beings equally valuable.

Being made in the image of God gives value to those some considered “less than” valuable.

In a culture that rejects the concept of being made in God’s image, the strong prevail and the weak are discarded. It leads to injustice and heinous discrimination, racism and bigotry.

If you ask me whether I have been discriminated against? My answer is Yes.

My spirituality is strongly built on the foundational belief that I am made in the image of God. So I refuse to be offended as I have grown older and mature.
Just because someone casts a slur against me or treats me differently, I have not lost the image of God in me. I am a child of God. If someone treats me less than who I am, I am still who God made me to be.

And so, often I feel sorry for people who mistreat, or discriminate and I pray for them. I am very strongly grounded in the image of God.

Racism can often be found in our hearts—in many cases placed there unwillingly or unknowingly by our upbringing and culture.

As such, it can lead to thoughts and actions that we do not even see as racist, but nonetheless flow from the same prejudicial root. Consciously or subconsciously, this attitude of superiority can be seen in how certain groups of people are vilified, called criminals, or are perceived as being unable to contribute to society, even unworthy of its benefits.

I would like to conclude with the words of Dr. Ambedkar. He was born as one of the 160 million untouchables of India.

He said, “Breaking up the Caste system was not to bring about inter-caste dinners and inter-caste marriages but to destroy the religious notions on which Caste was founded.” Mark the last word, “destroy the religious notions on which Caste was founded.”

You can be a pious Hindu, and still be a racist, You can be a fervent Jew and still be a racist. You can be a good Catholic sitting right here in the pews and still be a racist.

Religion can sometimes make us feel that we are superior to others, that we are saved and others damned.

If only we can learn from St. Paul today and see the image of God imprinted on the faces of the other. If only we take to heart the beautiful phrase, “Christ is all, and is in all.”

Amen.