

CHURCH OF ST. PATRICK

53 ST. PATRICK'S PLACE STATEN ISLAND, NY 10306

June 7, 2020

Dear Parishioner,

As if the pandemic and the economic woes of 40,000,000 Americans were not enough we are now faced with the ugly specter of racism and violence in our streets. It is painful to watch the violence of a few policemen and groups of opportunistic terrorists and anarchists from the right and the left of our society. It reminds us of the violence that tore our society apart during the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. I was at Honor America Day on July 4, 1970 at the Washington Monument where there were people that were supporting the war, as well as a group opposed to the war. The police tear gassed the anti-war people and they ran, but then the wind shifted and the others ran. It was a divisive time in our nation's history – and 50 years later our latent racism, and division, and prejudice, and frustration, and anger have come to the surface once more.

Apparently the issue that we thought was solved by the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement still appears to be unresolved. With all the work that we have done with Equal Rights, and Voting Rights, and Housing, and Busing to equalize educational opportunities as well as the advancement that has come to our Afro-American brothers and sisters in all areas of our society, even to the point of Barack Obama's ascendancy to the presidency, we still see the stain of racism and bigotry in our society.

When I was growing up in Yonkers I went to St. Peter's School. There were 900+ students in our school. One of them was black. His name was Michael. He was a couple of grades behind me. I never really got to know him. Black people lived in a segregated area of Yonkers, only on one street, Culver Street, and our parents told us to stay away from there and keep away from "them." There was something scary about the warnings they gave us about sticking with our own kind and not mixing with "them." I went to High School in Manhattan and there were no blacks in my grade. There was one in the year ahead, but I didn't know him very well. He wasn't part of my group. So I grew up with a prejudice against "them" even though I had almost no contact with any of "them."

When I was in college Martin Luther King was leading the Civil Rights Movement and I enthusiastically supported him and President Johnson and all the initiatives that brought about greater equality in our society. Intellectually I was very accepting of equality but I wasn't very pleased when "they" moved into the neighborhood and the quality of neighborhood seemed to go down. I still was suspicious. I still was afraid. I still wasn't comfortable living in our integrated area. I worked in a Day Camp as Director during my seminary years and the camp was half white and half black. This made me a little more comfortable and a little less afraid as I moved toward the priesthood.

When I was ordained I was assigned to parishes that were largely white, especially St. Patrick's and OLSS. I spent one year teaching at Spellman High School in the Bronx, during which time I was moderator of the Afro-American Society (the 240 blacks in the school). I had to "talk them down" from doing what they wanted to do to the student who dressed as a Klansman for Halloween – so I got a look at racism from the side of the victims. I spent 4 ½ years as Pastor of St. Paul's in New Brighton and watched the school go from 15% black to 55% black, and I saw the racist reaction of some of the white parents who took out their anger on me for allowing the school to "go down the tubes." They couldn't say that they wanted St. Paul's to be the "white" school and St. Peter's the "black" school. They had to come up with other reasons why they were angry. I could see clearly that they were very upset that their neighborhood and their school changed. I don't even know whether they were aware of their prejudice and their racism but it was certainly evident to me and the Archdiocese.

Almost all of us feel prejudiced, and are suspicious and afraid. That is the way we were raised. We can't help the feelings. But, we can do something about the actions. The four police officers in Minneapolis were prejudiced and suspicious, and afraid, but something more is demanded of them in their positions of authority. There is a big difference but a short leap between feeling prejudice and acting on it. They are expected to let their intellect not their emotions control their actions. It is sad enough that after all these years so many of us still have these negative ingrained attitudes, but it is a tragedy to see these attitudes explode on the streets of so many of our cities.

What do we need to do? First of all we have to admit that we are prejudiced and then we need to pray for a change of heart so that the prejudices that were given to us as children and confirmed through hard experiences of life can be healed. God can do that if we really want it and keep asking for it. Second, we as a society must hold accountable all those involved in racist actions or activities that maintain a system of racism in our country.

We fought a Civil War in which 600,000 people died, and more have died since then to actualize the words of our nation's creed: "All men (and women) are created equal." With God's grace we pray that at long last these words will come true.

God bless you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jeffrey B. Conway". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Jeff Conway, Pastor

JPC/smb