

St. Francis of Assisi Parish Ann Arbor

June 1, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The recent killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis has again opened up a difficult and painful wound at the heart of our nation. Once again, we are torn apart by racial and civil unrest. This is not the first time and sadly, it probably won't be the last. Like you the video of the police officer with his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck sent shivers down my spine. It is one of those images that cannot be erased as it contains such disregard for the gift of human life, as well as the use of excess power. When combined with Mr. Floyd's words, "*I can't breathe,*" one can only be filled with deep sadness and even righteous anger.

Now, I know that these deadly actions do not represent the work and mission of every police officer or police department. Like you, I have had recourse to their help in the past and know most officers to be decent, hardworking, and committed upholders of the law. As is often the case, it is the small minority that has tarnished the reputation of the whole group.

In the aftermath of this indefensible death, there has been such an outpouring of outrage and protest- injustice always demands that we raise our voices- silence can only be taken as approval. Peaceful protest in the face of such injustice is the right of every citizen and the duty of every right thinking person. But protests that lead to the further loss of life, or the destruction of property can never be condoned. As Mr. Floyd's family has so eloquently reminded us, this violence and destruction pays no homage to their late brother's memory.

Yet, many feel powerless as they watch these terrible events unfold. As your pastor, it would be remiss of me not to comment on these challenging times and to try to see them through the perspective of our Catholic faith. Here again our faith has much to say and to teach us on the issues that have caused this national wound and how we might go about healing it. Here are a few thoughts that we might hold in mind as we seek to understand and face this issue:

- We believe that every human life is sacred to God. God does not differentiate between us on color, race, culture or language. We are his children and so are of infinite value and dignity.
- Every person is entitled to the gift of life and that life is more precious than mere material items.
- Justice is an attribute of God and so must be pursued by all of us. The officer who perpetrated this offense has been arrested and charged and rightly so. It is best if we leave this particular case to the legal process to deal with and to mete out the appropriate sentence.
- Violence is never the answer, as it only begets further destruction and the possibility of more loss of life. If past similar events have taught us

anything, it is that violence both hinders constructive dialogue and destroys the fabric of communities, especially communities that are already struggling financially and economically like many of our inner cities.

Yet, the wound that I spoke of above is part of our national experience and can no longer be ignored. It is both historical and real. Too many people have lost their lives, especially among our African-American brothers and sisters. As the richest nation in the world, with the most powerful economic engine, it seems shocking that we have such levels of poverty and deprivation side by side with wealth and extravagance. Sharing of God's blessing is the responsibility of all, as it the duty of all to work for the common good and to use our gifts and talents to this end.

As a pastor, I stay out of the world of party politics- my task is to proclaim the Gospel and apply it to our lives. So, as I watch the progress of our nation, I can only remark that the current political impasse has added greater tension and dissension to our struggles and has hampered the chance of any meaningful dialogue and solution. We need our politicians to work for the common good and not just their own agenda, and we need to direct and join them in this task. As often, it is the noisy and active extremists who gain the most attention-of course the media is seeking to cover events like this and will often focus on the sensational, over what is peaceful and constructive. They too have a responsibility in seeking healing and the pursuit of justice and not merely the next big story!

As pastor, I have tried to remind all of us of our duty to care for the less fortunate and I am so grateful for all that you do to this end. The pursuit of justice, like the Gospel itself, is color blind and knows no ethnicity or race. Our nation, often described as the great "*melting pot*," is diverse and full of potential and hope. We need to work to ensure that everyone shares in that hope and that no one is left behind- feeling unvalued, unwanted or dis-respected- we need to ensure that that what makes us different is seen as a strength and a gift from God.

So, I ask you to pray- pray for the family of George Floyd in their moment of grief, pray that justice will be done, pray for the healing of our nation and for its well being and common good. And then look out for those moments when you can speak up and defend the gift of life, the dignity of all and the promise of this great nation- look out for those opportunities to learn more about the work done by our parish Peace and Justice Committee in pursuit of justice and racial harmony.

<https://www.stfrancisa2.com/racial-justice/> Together we can all make a difference and build that society where all are valued and all can contribute.

Yours in Christ,

Fr. James Conlon

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