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WHEN WORDS FALL SHORT

A PASTORAL LETTER ON RACISM

Bishop George Leo Thomas, Ph.D.

Diocese of Las Vegas

June 10, 2020



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No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

~ Nelson Mandela ~

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The tragic and inhumane death of Mr. George Floyd has enraged the nation and galvanized people across the globe to cry out together for justice in his name.

In fewer than nine minutes, we witnessed breathtaking footage of an unarmed black man receiving capital punishment for a petty crime, pleading for his life while crying out those infamous words that haunt the soul of this nation. "I can't breathe."

That breathtaking scene has torn the curtain back on a grave and silent sin that continues to disease and demean the spirit of our nation, and that is the pernicious sin of racism.

Now, the individual and collective voices of people everywhere crying out "Black Lives Matter," "No Justice, No Peace!," "Justice for George!," will not be silenced until there is real, deliberate, and systemic change in American society and in nations across the world.

This time, words, chants, prayers, and placards, however necessary and sincere, will not be enough to satisfy the hue and cry of the people.

We want real evidence of real change.

A PATHWAY INTO THE FUTURE

During the past 120 years, the Catholic Church has developed a body of teaching that has evolved over time and can serve as a blueprint as we help to forge a new and more hopeful future together.

Catholic Social Teaching offers a series of time-tested principles that can be applied in the most complex and vexing of situations, especially in times where the future seems unclear if not overwhelming.

The basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching can assist our pastors, lay leaders, parishioners, civic leaders, and people of goodwill to think more clearly, to plan more creatively, to listen more attentively, and to act more decisively.

Catholic Social Teaching has the potential to provide an enlightened pathway into the future.

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THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

The starting point of Catholic Social Teaching is the deep and inviolable conviction that every person, without exception, is made in the image and likeness of God.

This doctrine of *Imago Dei* helps us to see others with new eyes and clearer vision. The second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence – “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” echoes this first principle of Catholic Social Teaching.

The implications of this foundational principle of Catholic Social Teaching are clear and compelling. There are no throwaway people, no second class citizens, and no disposable souls. Every person is an unrepeatable and unique gift of God, binding us together as a human family, as sisters and brothers, each with inestimable worth and inalienable rights.

We are a Church that holds that all life is sacred, from the moment of conception until natural death. Under the banner of Catholic Social Teaching, we say with resounding voices, “Yes! Black Lives Matter!”

COMMUNITY

In the 17th century, the English poet John Donne wrote those famous words that “No man is an island, entire of itself...” Through the power of poetry, Donne argued for the interconnectedness of all people with one another and with God.

Catholic Social Teaching underscores the fact that human beings are not intended to live in isolation, but rather in community with each other. We are, by nature, social beings.

This is why the American Bishops wrote that “human dignity can be realized and protected only in community.”¹

The Church, without endorsing partisan politics or particular politicians, underscores the need to raise up and support elected officials and community leaders who are dedicated to creating and maintaining healthy community life, where both safety and opportunity are available to every person, regardless of age, race, gender, or religion.

What happens when certain individuals feel unsafe, unprotected, unwanted, and unequal in the very community whose purpose is to provide for them equal protection under the law?

Look no further than the headlines of the day.

THE SIN OF RACISM

Racism is an affront to the life of the community, and a grave sin that calls out to the heavens for redress. “Racism arises when – either consciously or unconsciously – a person holds that

¹ USCCB (2009), *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*. Pg. viii.

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his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard.”²

Racist acts are sinful violations of justice. They wear many faces and don many disguises.

Racism can be seen in deliberate, sinful acts of violence and extremism, and in attitudes of superiority and prejudicial humor. It is found in unjust social structures that tolerate or abet discrimination in hiring, in housing and lending practices, in the denial of educational opportunities, and in disparities in healthcare. Racism is clearly reflected in the disproportionate imprisonment of minorities.

It is also found in sins of omission and complacency, in attitudes of superiority, and in subtle inattention to injustice, most especially when people turn a blind eye to the presence of violence and overt acts of bigotry.

The tragic death of George Floyd has torn the scab away from the gaping wound of racism that still infects communities across the globe.

What is needed in this critical moment is a genuine conversion of heart and a commitment to renew our communities.

The words of Pope Francis ring true in our hearts: “Let no one think that this invitation is not meant for him or her.”³

THE COMMON GOOD

In a time when considerable attention is given to individual rights and personal freedom, the concept of the “common good” is frequently overlooked.

In a powerful description of the common good, Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M. wrote that “The good of each person...is connected to the good of others (and) that no description of the common good can exclude concern for an individual, writing off some person or group as unworthy of our interest.”⁴

The parables of Jesus and the teachings of the Old Testament responded to the age old question, “Who is my neighbor?”

The answer to the question is a practical illustration of concern for the common good. In ancient Israel, the prophets asked the people never to lose sight of the needs of the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the imprisoned.

² USCCB Committee on Cultural Diversity (2018), *Open wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love – A Pastoral Letter Against Racism*. Washington, DC. Pg. 3.

³*id.* *Open Wide Your Hearts*. Pg. 7. Citing Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 3.

⁴ Himes, Kenneth R., O.F.M., (2001). *Responses to 101 Questions on Catholic Social Teaching*. Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press. Pg. 36.

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Jesus summed up all other commandments by appealing to the commandment of love: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12:30-31.) St. Paul solemnly declared that this commandment of love fulfills the law as it is a fulfillment of all the others. (Rom 13:10.)

Jesus took his teaching a step further, demanding that his followers:

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt.5, 43-48.)

Scripture scholar Xavier Léon-Dufour, SJ, says succinctly that this commandment supposes that we have destroyed all barriers in our hearts, so well that love can touch the enemy himself.

The U.S. Bishops have consistently taught that every human being has a right to life, the fundamental right that makes all other rights possible, and a right to access those things required for human decency -- whether food, shelter, education and employment, healthcare and housing, freedom of religion, and family life.

Whenever anyone is deprived of the right to life, society is poorer, basic values are compromised, and every human life is devalued and made more vulnerable.

PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Another important component of Catholic Social Teaching is called the “preferential option for the poor.” This is the Church’s way of acknowledging that in far too many cases, we are blinded to the very people living in our midst.

A preferential option for the poor helps us to see with new eyes and experience life with new sensitivity toward those who are weak, vulnerable, impoverished, and marginalized, those suffering in silent squalor, often “living lives of quiet desperation” right before our very eyes.

A preferential option for the poor asks us to see with new eyes, and with our vision enlightened by the Gospel. It invites us to live in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, and to assist the unseen and underserved with generosity and care. In the words of St. John Paul, we can do this best by sharing with others, not simply from our surplus but from our very substance.

The second part of this preferential option is far more daunting.

It bids us to ask the difficult questions, “What are the *underlying* causes of poverty, misery, inequality, and racism, and what must we do to effect real, concrete, and substantial change in the way we live, both individually, and as a society? Another way of putting it is to see charity

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as a response to the *effects* of personal and social ills while justice aims at remedying the *causes* of such ills.”⁵

Kenneth Himes has wisely written:

Unfortunately, there has been a tendency by some Catholics to denigrate one or the other of these responses to the Gospel. There are proponents of justice who dismiss charity as “band-aids” that cover-up but did not eradicate the problem. Others who advocate charity see justice activities as political ideology masquerading as religious work or an excuse for not “getting your hands dirty” through direct contact with the poor.⁶

Both views are inadequate and short-sighted.

Catholic Social Teaching is clear in its understanding that both charity and justice are necessary and interrelated components to an authentic response to the Gospel and a necessary response to the demands of Beatitude living.

SUBSIDIARITY AND DIALOGUE

The poorly understood concept of “subsidiarity” is another important aspect of Catholic Social Teaching.

Subsidiarity means that decisions affecting individuals and local communities should allow those who are affected by those decisions to be invited into the decision-making process, whether at the polls, through community organizing, and, when necessary, by means of peaceful protest.

The principle of subsidiarity is based on the values of active dialogue, community engagement, relationships building, mutual respect, and attentive listening.

During the past year, I have met personally with the top law enforcement officials on the city, county, state and federal levels. These included the Clark County Sheriff and North Las Vegas Police Chief, the Special Agent in Charge of the local Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Attorney for Nevada, and our State Attorney General.

I emerged from these meetings convinced we are a community that has not only learned much from the tragedies and failures of the past, but has also put into place best practices and sound policies to help promote high quality law enforcement and build community confidence.

Perfect? No. But every leader acknowledged that they and their agencies are works in progress, open to substantial community input and constructive criticism.

An important point in moving forward is the acknowledgment that most police officers in our community are decent, hard-working, ethical, and service oriented women and men.

⁵ Id. Pg. 45.

⁶ Id. Pgs. 45 – 46.

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Their top leaders have a number of policies and best practices in their respective jurisdictions that should be very encouraging to the public at large. These include community policing, substantial interfaith and ecumenical leadership engagement, and the establishment of civilian academies.

Our law enforcement leadership has shown openness both to dialogue and criticism, commitment to ongoing officer training, supervision and evaluation, a preference for de-escalation tactics, the routine use of body cameras, crisis intervention training, and humane and nonlethal force in highly charged situations.

I have also been equally gratified by our community's strong reaction and clear distaste for violent behavior masquerading as protest.

Our community has summarily rejected looting and opportunistic crime, making it clear that these travesties have no place here. There is strong community consensus that perpetrators of hate, violence, and property destruction should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Taken together, local law enforcement officials and a peace-loving public represent a unique and powerful catalyst for hope and healing as we move into the future together.

SUMMARY

These basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching serve as a North Star, helping society, its decision-makers and citizens, to envision a renewed community that is based on equality, justice, fairness, and dialogue.

George Floyd's death is a call to action and a time for community engagement among civic and government leaders, the ecumenical and interfaith community, and members of the community at large to listen attentively and to act decisively, helping address and eradicate the sin of racism and forge a future full of hope.

There are many ways to seize the moment:

- Acquaint yourself with Catholic Social Teaching;
- Educate yourself on the history and causes of racism in our Country;
- Never underestimate the power of the polling place;
- Raise your voice whenever you see racism, injustice, or discrimination rear their heads;
- Disengage yourself from racial and discriminatory humor;
- Support private and public efforts that help to strengthen family life;
- Help to create a just workplace at your own place of employment;
- Support educational opportunities for the young;
- Be present and active at community meetings on the city and county levels;
- Share ideas and express your concerns with legislators and members of Congress;
- Make a conscious effort to engage with people beyond our zones of comfort to build relationships;
- Take advantage of civilian academy opportunities offered by law enforcement departments;
- Involve yourself in diocesan and parish outreach to the poor and the underserved;

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- Engage in interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and social service efforts;
- Share your time and treasure with the poor and needy in our community;
- Pray for justice and peace as a family and parish.

The visions and values of Catholic Social Teaching provide a lodestar in times of darkness and uncertainty. They give us confidence that the life and Light of Christ overpower the storms and shadows of our day.

I believe in my heart that we are on the cusp of significant, positive, and life-giving change. I hope that you will do your part to effect the power and goodness of the Gospel.

In doing so, you honor the memory of George Floyd as our community and nation cry out for justice in his name.