

Always In Spirit and in Breath:
A Pastoral Reflection and Response Regarding
the Issue of Racism



By Rev. Michael K. Gurnick to the Parishioners
of Saint Patrick and Saint Malachi
Cleveland, Ohio

1 October 2020

Introduction

Since the tragic and wrongful death of Mr. George Floyd on May 25 international attention has focused on so many who have unnecessarily died at the hands of those in authority. Following this Memorial Day crime the number of peaceful demonstrations and protests throughout our country and all over the world give witness on behalf of victims who suffer, not only at the hands of a few police officers, but in the experience of daily life because of the color of one's skin.

The events following Mr. Floyd's death called upon our own community to respond. But prayer alone would not satisfy the cries of those who have collectively declared, "enough!" Even if the headlines move to other issues after a period of time, those cries for justice will continue. Rhetoric and momentary news coverage will not satisfy – not this time – as we confront the evil of racism.

As pastor of Saint Patrick Parish and as Administrator of Saint Malachi Parish, both communities serving Ohio City, I have had the opportunity to meet individually with over two dozen parishioners and members of our wider community to listen to their experiences and reactions and to also discuss possible responses and plans of action. Some of these individuals are persons of color and some describe themselves as social activists. Others are members of the law enforcement community or family of police officers. A number are parishioners of Saint Patrick or Saint Malachi while others are from the community. Some asked me to simply hear their stories while others requested active conversation. Since the first days of June, the nearly 40 hours of active engagement with these concerned individuals were well spent and enlightening, to say the very least. I am grateful to each for his or her time and willingness to reach out to me. My only regret is that we didn't have more time in those moments of encounter.

What did these encounters generally have in common? Every individual expressed a strong desire that this not be a fleeting moment before we move on to the next pastoral issue. Additionally, every individual offered to help in any way possible as we seek to serve the common good. I am grateful for their time, their trust, and their willingness to share from the depths of their own hearts.

To be sure, the Church, and more directly our parishes, have something to say. Like those I heard from, I believe to remain silent is not an option. However, silent reflection is part of forming a plan of action because the absence of silent reflection can lead to off-the-cuff or otherwise ill-informed reactions. This complex issue demands our most charitable response and it begins with empathetic listening.

With this in mind, I have spent at least an additional 30 hours researching and reading much of the materials recommended to me. I also appreciate the reflections and statements offered by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB) and other Catholic voices. I value the perspectives offered by other Christians and people of good will. The parable of Matthew 13:24-43 is helpful here. Jesus advised his disciples to let the wheat and the weeds mature before they make distinctions between the two.

With this, I humbly offer my perspective on how we might continue to approach this call for justice and to charitably respond to a real need within our Church and neighborhood.

Here are three common themes that I heard:

The first theme is the role of the Church in the fight against racism. Olga Segura (*How Can Catholics Help Lead the Fight Against Racism?* America Magazine, 29 May 2020), concludes that if we are to be a merciful Church, “we must rebuke the violence that took the lives of Ms. Breonna Taylor, Mr. Floyd and so many others. This means courageously and radically transforming our church into an active force for justice and a solace when the world seems to tell our people that we don’t matter. To be a church that follows Pope Francis means that as Catholics, we are to be a church that sets an example for all Americans and fight for the protection and dignity of all black lives.”

I agree with Ms. Segura that the Church must be a leader and set an example. We do have a voice and a proven history – though certainly imperfect – of advocating for the oppressed and marginalized.

The second theme is an honest examination of our own blind spots when it comes to racism and our consistent proclamation of a Gospel of Life. Christopher White, national correspondent for Cruxnow.com, offers perspective in his article, “*Killing of George Floyd Exposes Blind Spot on Racism, Catholic Advocates Say* (28 May 2020). White’s main point is summarized by Gloria Purvis, host of EWTN’s radio show, *Morning Glory*, who explains, “that Floyd’s death – and the commentary around it – evidences a ‘blind spot’ among white American Catholics, as well as a double standard among pro-life Catholics who fail to see that combatting racism should be an integral part of their pro-life witness.” She continues, “Racism is real, it’s a deliberate choice, to act, to behave in a manner that purposefully denigrates someone of the other race. And racism makes God into a liar (1).” When we defend persons of color we are embracing a pro-life position; in the same way, when we defend the unborn, we advocate for all lives – especially the thousands of unborn babies, disproportionately targeted from among black and other minority communities. To recognize the dignity and worth of these minority populations will protect so many of the most vulnerable in our midst.

I find in the words of the U.S. bishops a pastoral call for empathy on the part of our entire community. In their 2018 pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the bishops acknowledge that, “... in our prisons, the numbers of inmates of color, notably those who are brown or black, is grossly disproportionate. Despite the great blessings of liberty that this country offers, we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and danger.” Racism can only end if we address the policies and institutional barriers that perpetuate and preserve the inequality – economic and social – that we still see all around us (2).

The third theme is how the Church can participate while remaining peaceful and faithful to our own moral and social teaching. There are many Catholics who struggle between the call to battle racism and the Church’s involvement with organizations rooted in what many describe as “radical,” specifically groups that come with violent and destructive intent. These groups infiltrate and frustrate other well-intentioned people who are focused on peaceful demonstration and legitimately seeking ways for systemic change.

To be sure, exactly who *Black Lives Matter* (3) is remains a question and requires serious consideration as the Church leaders dialogue with this and other associations and organizations. Perhaps the seriousness of substantial differences between Catholic social teaching and the values embraced by this or other organizations is a call for the Catholic Church to lead the path for social reform while identifying compatible voices and initiatives consistent with our teachings. In other words, while we name these differences, we can also look for some common points.

Catholic Social Teaching: A Consistent Belief that All Life Matters

In his 1983 address at Fordham University, the late Joseph Cardinal Bernadin (1928 – 1996) outlined what would become his famous *seamless garment* as he described the need for a consistent ethic of life. His main point was that a new interconnection between the forces of destruction made possible by modern technologies need to be challenged by a consistent approach to all human life. If one aspect of life is threatened, other areas of life will be threatened.

For Bernadin, *consistent* simply meant that there is a clear connection among all issues of life. He further concluded that if we are to defend the “right to life” we must also work to “enhance all life (4).” Furthermore, no hesitation was made when he claimed this understanding toward life must be an attitude found within each culture.

Why is this important for us as Catholics? Because we are called to defend all human life from conception to natural death. To defend the one waiting to be born and the one who is entitled to his or her rightful dignity as a human person regardless of race or social status must be treated with consistency. Although a hierarchy among these life issues exists, one issue necessarily impacts the others. Without this consistency we are proclaiming only part of the Gospel. Before his ascension, Jesus did not tell his disciples to go out and preach part of his good news. They were to preach the fullness of the Gospel!

Along these same lines, Bernadin challenged our society – regardless of creed – to appreciate this fundamental truth. As people of good will, as intellectual persons, the natural conclusion is that all of civilization must have a common attitude of respect for human life. The defending and enhancing of all life can be appreciated by everyone and this common attitude can benefit all areas of social concern (5).

I believe using these guiding principles when reflecting upon any aspect of social concern will be helpful. Let us consider the whole of our efforts in light of the graced tension between “defending all life” and “enhancing all life.” After all, promoting justice is not a matter of doling out charity; it is recognizing what rightfully belongs to every human person.

A New Mandate: Love One Another

Elsewhere in sacred scripture, Christ’s command to “love one another” is how we make manifest our Christian identity. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (Jn. 13:34-35).

With the turmoil of a pandemic, social unrest, and political divisions, we have received the divine grace to joyfully stand together as we advocate for all human life. Let sacred words be uttered from our lips but may they be accompanied by acts of genuine love and charity. Otherwise, far more weeds will be present and the lack of wheat will lead to famine.

During these tumultuous times it is tempting to be distracted by forceful voices or social bullies. In an age of relativism we can become convinced that a “variety of truths” can justify our beliefs and actions,

or lack thereof. But we Catholics believe that authentic love for one another is rooted in the fullness of truth, the gift of personal freedom, and the responsibility borne out of this freedom (6).

Therefore, if there is going to be a true movement for racial equality, the starting point is to recognize the truth of our own personhood, the freedom to live as the image of God, and the responsibility to love every person and defend his or her inherent dignity and worth. Without this, we will never fulfill the command to love another.

While some of the individuals with whom I met believe that the Church community is not doing enough to address racism, others expressed gratitude to the USCCB, individual bishops, and individual Catholic leaders. However, all were in agreement that we can and we should do something on the local level.

In Our Parish Communities

In light of the ideas offered by many of the powerful conversations and the recommended readings, I invite our parishioners to join me in five specific action steps:

First, I invite every parishioner to pray for an end to racism and oppression. Make it an intentional part of our daily prayer. As we pray, let us examine our own personal attitude toward persons different than ourselves and how we may manifest various forms of bias or prejudice against others in the way we think, how we speak, actions we take. This may be a rather simple step but personal awareness and a prayerful demeanor can radically open our hearts.

Second, I ask that that we find ways to bring the topic of racism to our faith formation, from youth catechesis to adult enrichment. Adapted for each age group, the topic itself must be raised and integrated with our Catholic beliefs. I have begun having conversations with various groups within our parish as to how this can concretely be reflected. Gladly, some groups have already begun addressing this important topic.

Third, I have asked a group of individuals to join me in gathering helpful information and to facilitate opportunities to involve the wider parish community in conversations and potential action steps. My hope is that a number of perspectives may be heard as we include many voices.

Fourth, I will be working with our liturgical leaders in fostering social awareness. Throughout the liturgical seasons there will be a special focus on our intercessions and other prayers where appropriate. We will also be inviting parishioners to prayerfully participate in opportunities throughout the year.

Finally, I will be looking for ways to engage with other neighborhood faith leaders as we commemorate civil holidays and join voices as we address racism and other areas of social concern.

Go Forth and Glorify the Lord by Your Lives

At the end of the Mass these or similar words of dismissal give us the direction to go forth as members of a sacred assembly into the world to proclaim the Gospel. Let us take note that the words do not suggest that we will find ourselves comfortable or without the possibility of suffering. We are to simply go and do the work we're called to do. For many in our parish communities I have the privilege

of seeing this connection between the Eucharistic liturgy and daily witness lived out in so many of our members. As I see this authentic witness I am confident that we will continue to find our voice in this pressing issue of racism as well as the other issues that we must confront in order to foster a Culture of Life. May the Lord continue to strengthen us as we go about this important work on behalf of our sisters and brothers. May Christ continue to give us spirit and breath as we respond to racism and other needs of our times.

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About the Title and Illustration

The title of this pastoral reflection, "Always in Spirit and in Breath: A Pastoral Reflection and Response Regarding the Issue of Racism," is inspired by Job 34:14. While spending these past months listening and reflecting, I came across this passage that speaks of God's own power to take away our spirit and breath. Without them, we perish. But in recent days, I connected this with the way Mr. George Floyd died. His breath left him because of the cruel action of another - and he died. However, spirit and breath remain in the living and every breath we take is an opportunity to do good - we choose to use this precious gift in response to the injustices we witness all too often.

The illustration, "Source of Life and Breath," features the Holy Spirit as the source and animator of all truth. The streams flowing from the Holy Spirit enjoy a double-meaning, symbolizing the seven supernatural gifts while also accentuating the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching: Life and Dignity of the Human Person; Call to Family, Community, and Participation; Rights and Responsibilities; Option for the Poor and Vulnerable; The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers; Solidarity; and Care for God's Creation. The use of red and blue brings together the divine and human nature of Christ who, in obedience to the Father, sanctified each of these seven themes through his ministry. These colors also reflect the water and blood that flowed from his side as he died so that we may all have life.

ADDITIONAL NOTES AND COMMENTS

- (1) While I challenge Purvis' idea that God could be a liar in any situation (for God is Truth), her words should not be ignored as we Catholics proclaim the dignity of all human life.
- (2) While attention is currently focused on deaths within the black community, the fact is that many suffer oppression, discrimination, and become subject to violence because of the color of their skin, their accent, or where they were born. We see evidence of this in our workplaces, neighborhoods, and other environments that can all too easily segregate and classify along these lines.
- (3) According to Catholic News Service (17 June 2020) the issue is whether *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) is an actual organization or merely a collective movement with loose association and leadership. Gloria Purvis, again cited in this article, believes *Black Lives Matter* represents a whole "movement for racial justice...once which is now global without a single leader." On the other hand, Ryan Bomberger, a pro-life activist and co-founder of the Radiance Foundation, does not endorse BLM because it is "hostile to Christian values" and, as he and many people believe, is seeking political power.

To complicate matters more, other groups with radical or malicious intent often pollute peaceful demonstrations. *Antifa* and extreme a number of radical right groups come to mind. Their sole objective is to disrupt and impose their own agenda which ultimately distracts from the sincere demonstrations advocating for equality and the end of systemic racism. It is for this reason that several of our parishioners and others I have encountered believe the Church must be a leading voice without endorsing a "broken secular movement." For others, BLM remains a viable avenue for advancing the cause but distinguishing between BLM and those groups seeking to hijack otherwise peaceful agendas and demonstrations.

Bishop Shelton Fabre, chair of the U.S. Bishops' committee on racism, believes that BLM "has a broad agenda covering many social issues, some of which are not in harmony with Catholic teaching." Most Reverend Edward Braxton, Bishop Emeritus of Bellville, wrote in 2016 that BLM seems to be a movement rather than an organization. He did note, however, that leaders in the BLM movement he encountered "reject the Church's teaching on sexuality, marriage, and abortion." Braxton concluded in the same pastoral letter that "all Catholics have an obligation to work for racial justice in the framework of Catholic teaching about the dignity of the human person, and the sanctity of human life and to work, above all, for conversion."

And then there is the Consultant to the USCCB Subcommittee on African American Affairs. Although my personal conclusion regarding the Church's affiliation with Black Lives Matter may differ from that of Andrea Marissa Augustus' strong support of it, I do share her belief that is rooted in 1 Corinthians which stresses that, if one part of the body of Christ suffers, every part suffers with it. While her conclusion may be different than mine, I do agree with Augustus that we all suffer because of racial injustice. BLM may have touch points with which our faith community connect as we continue to raise awareness and call for racial equality.

- (4) Using the language of "enhancing all life" I raise the issue of racism and other forms of bigotry that continue to afflict our society. The right for every individual to receive what is needed to

maintain a basic quality of life is not optional. It is consistent with our pro-life work. However, it needs to be interwoven with all the other life issues. In simple terms, “social justice” and “right to life” walk hand in hand. Dr. Ron Hamel, Associate Director of the Catholic Health Association of St. Louis, in an address on the 25th anniversary of Cardinal Bernadin’s groundbreaking address, powerfully summarized the late archbishop’s core beliefs: “Those who defend the right to life of the weakest among us must be equally visible in support of the quality of life of the powerless among us: the old and the young, the hungry and the homeless, the undocumented immigrant and the unemployed worker.” This, of course, must include persons who suffer oppression because of the color of their skin.

(5) This is further echoed in the US Bishops’ pastoral letter, *Living the Gospel of Life* (1998). Also, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that it is our “duty of making oneself a neighbor to others and actively serving them becomes even more urgent when it involves the disadvantaged, in whatever area this may be. ‘As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me (CCC no. 1932).’”

(6) I am mindful of the diverse minds and voices who bring a sincere heart to the conversation. Even within the scope of our Catholic viewpoint, there is a wide range of opinions and insights.

Some of these ideas and conclusions might require the test of time before we can distinguish between what proves helpful and what does not. Quick reactions and rash assessments can lead to more pain and strife and can cause division instead of unity. Admittedly, this approach can be frustrating for some but it can also serve us well as we grapple with the complexity of this and other social issues.