

CARDINAL SEÁN'S LETTER TO THE PEOPLE OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF BOSTON

June 5, 2020

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

For four hundred and one years this land, which would become the United States of America, has had to deal with the evil and moral cancer that is racism.

When the word racism is invoked it is often identified in personal terms: someone whose attitudes, convictions and actions target a group of other individuals because of color. This is a valid but only partial meaning of the term. From such people as Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, to contemporary leaders, thinkers and activists, African Americans have tried consistently to expand the general understanding of racism. In word and deed, they have pointed to the reality of systemic and structural racism.

Racism and slavery find a common nexus in this country, the denial of the humanity and dignity of other persons. As a nation we abolished slavery legally, but we have not dealt with its enduring legacy. If we reject slavery then we must reject and denounce the dehumanizing attitudes that foster discrimination, inequality and violence. Racism can be explicit, but it also can be unrecognized and unacknowledged. Yet, all of its manifestations are deadly and corrosive to civil society. Like COVID-19, racism can infect any person, without regard to region, religion, race or ethnicity. It is highly contagious, easily transmitted to others, and too often unseen and disguised in those seemingly healthy. Racism is a social and spiritual disease that kills people.

The murder of George Floyd, an African American citizen, at the hands of four rogue police officers was tragically all too familiar to the African American community. During our lifetimes there has been the reality of the Negro Travelers Green Book, identifying locations where African Americans stop and stay in our country with less likelihood of being attacked. We have seen the Ku Klux Klan's brutal lynchings of innocent black people. And we have now again witnessed heinous violence perpetrated by some who were entrusted with the duty to protect. George Floyd's death makes clear that racist premises and attitudes, often implicit, are woven through basic structures—political, legal, economic, cultural and religious—in the United States.

The earliest days of my priesthood were lived in Washington, D.C. on 16th St. in the heart of the city. I was there the night Dr. Martin Luther King., Jr. was

assassinated. The city was set ablaze with 700 fires, tanks lined the streets around the White House and soldiers with bayonets stood on every corner. The killing of Dr. King sparked despair and rage throughout the African American community in the United States. Since then there have been important and meaningful advances of civil rights and the election of an African American President. But to know that fifty years later four police officers would see themselves entitled to murder a black man with impunity makes clear how far we must yet go to achieve racial equality.

In the weeks following Dr. King's assassination in 1968, during the time of the Poor People's March on Washington, I joined the individuals and families at Resurrection City at the Lincoln Memorial. Off duty police officers hurled tear gas at our encampment and shouted vile profanities at us. I did not then, and we do not now judge all police officers on the basis of the reprehensible, criminal acts of those few who betray their brothers and sisters in uniform. The vast majority of police officers, very notably in Boston through the leadership of Commissioner Gross, serve as heroic, selfless first responders who take seriously their mission and face danger to protect others.

The antidote to the poison of racism is community and solidarity. The protests in response to George Floyd's murder, in my view, have been predominantly peaceful and focused on the urgent need to address racism as a systemic, cultural, and legal reality. Some violent protesters and out of town infiltrators, few in number but by intention disproportionately visible, had interest in neither justice nor its achievement. As Governor Baker stated, they should be legally punished and should not be able to tarnish the greater significance of the peaceful marches and demonstrations we have witnessed.

We recognize that the Catholic Church in the United States must contend with our historical complicity in slavery and our need for racial healing. However, an important part of the legacy of the Catholic faith is our social teaching. The Catholic Church is a community of people of all colors, nationalities and ethnicities. Catholic moral teaching is based on the fact that all people – without regard to race, religion, ethnicity or nationality – are created in the image of God. This teaching rejects any form of racism, personal or systemic. Our faith calls us to leadership in breaking down barriers and standing against injustice. To violate human dignity is to dishonor the presence of Christ in each person.

Going forward, the reality of racism in our society and the moral imperative of racial equality and justice must be incorporated in our schools, our teaching and our preaching. We must uphold the commitments to equal dignity and human rights in all institutions of our society, in politics, law, economy, education. Catholic teaching on social justice measures the way a society acts fairly or not. Our work will not be done until African American men, women and children are treated equally in every aspect of life in the United States.

The killing of George Floyd is painful evidence of what is and has been at stake for African Americans - the failure of society in too many ways to protect their lives and the lives of their children. As Catholics we are taught to nurture and protect life from its inception to its natural end and at every moment in-between. The demonstrations and protests of these days have been calls for justice and heart wrenching expressions of deep emotional pain from which we cannot turn away. They call us to affirm the inestimable value of every person's life. They call us to redouble our commitment to foster respect and justice for all people. They call us to uphold and defend the truth that Black Lives Matter.

With the assurance of my continued prayers,

Devotedly yours in Christ,

Cardinal Seán O'Malley, OFM, Cap.
Archbishop of Boston