

Catholic Review Column: Freddie Gray's Death Reminds Us How Far We Have to Go

The untimely death of Freddie Gray Jr., a 25-year-old African-American man who died seven days after he reportedly suffered a severe spinal injury while being arrested by Baltimore City police officers, has caused a great deal of pain, sadness and anger among many in our city and surrounding communities. The circumstances of his death, while still incomplete, further call into question the relationship between the community and police, a relationship long strained by accounts of brutality, harassment and profound distrust.

As people of faith, as children of God who are members of the same community, we share their pain, sadness and anger. We mourn the loss of another life that ended long before it should have. And we are saddened that in 2015 skin color continues to be a barrier to harmony for our human family as the sin of racism threatens our coexistence and rots our neighborhoods like a cancer. As people of faith we pray for patience and understanding and the conversion of heart that can only be brought about by mutual respect and understanding.

As a new year dawned the evening of Dec. 31, I was pleased to be a part of an interfaith prayer service in downtown Baltimore. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake was present, along with other officials and leaders of many of the city's faith communities. I was asked to offer a reflection and I spoke of the many challenges facing the city - poverty, violence, drug addiction - and all that our churches attempt to do to address these ills that negatively affect the members of our community.

“Even as we struggle to meet very basic human needs through safety-net programs, we recognize that nameless, faceless services are not enough. For without love, respect and personal relationships, our lives make no sense. We shouldn’t expect a person whose life makes no sense to pull himself up by his bootstraps into a productive and prosperous life,” I said. As people of faith, “we have an underlying conviction that God cares for us, that he knows and loves us, that he walks with us, and that he is leading us deeper in his love.”

In the joy of that conviction we should find the wisdom, love and courage to help rebuild not just the row houses of our city’s neighborhoods but the relationships that must exist in any community that is just and peaceful: the relationship of students to their teachers; the relationship of citizens to each other and to civic leaders, and the relationship of family members.

The family is where values can be taught and virtues learned; it’s where children’s dignity is affirmed and their sights raised higher. When families grow stronger, most other relationships improve and our communities improve. These past few days remind us that our community has a long way to go in rebuilding relationships, a critical step if we are to bring about change for the common good of all.

As we await the truth of what happened to Freddie, I invite not only Catholics but all people of good will to join me in praying for the Gray family and for all families devastated by the tragic death of a child of God. Let us pray together for the people of our community, for those in law enforcement who approach their job with dignity and honesty and goodness, and for those investigating Freddie’s tragic death, that their investigations will be swift, thorough, open and honest, and that it will help our community to find ways to address systemic issues.

May we unite in prayer for immediate and lasting healing, especially between members of our community and law enforcement, brought about by dialogue, mutual

respect and understanding. We pray that in the aftermath of Freddie's funeral and in the days to come, protesters will voice their views freely and openly but without violence, which only deepens and prolongs injustice. And finally, may we pray together that God will grace us always with his presence, so that our broken city can once again be whole and that our minds and our hearts will be open to peace and love.