

In Baltimore, Catholics join efforts to heal, clean up, move forward

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As Baltimore City cleaned up after a night of riots, looting and fires following the funeral of Freddie Gray Jr., Archbishop William E. Lori said the church's place is to pray, be a voice for peace, and participate in a wider community dialogue to solve the systemic issues that led to the unrest.

Gray, 25, died April 19, one week after being arrested on a weapons charge and sustaining a severe spinal cord injury in West Baltimore while in police custody. After his funeral April 27, peaceful protests turned into unrest later in the day, leading to damage of buildings and cars, and looting and fires seen nonstop on national TV news networks.

The next morning, as Archbishop Lori, Bishop Dennis J. Madden and other archdiocesan leaders toured the West Baltimore neighborhoods affected, adults and children with brooms and trash bags were as numerous as the rioters the night before.

Ray Kelly stopped outside of St. Peter Claver Church to talk with the archbishop's group and Josephite Father Ray P. Bomberger, the parish's pastor. "We're going to do a cleanup and bring Sandtown leaders together. We want to make sure that residents are part of this effort."

Kelly, who said he has lived in Sandtown-Winchester "forever - 44 years," said, "They've got to start restructuring. Right now. Today."

He said because he has lived here, he could feel it was going to happen. He and a

friend were talking after the weekend unrest April 25, and he wondered if this was the calm after the storm, or the calm before it. He said he knew “there’s more to come.”

Archbishop Lori made stops at St. Peter, St. Gregory the Great and the senior center next door, and at St. Edward, before heading to North Avenue to survey looted buildings and the carcass of a burned car.

He said during the unrest he called as many West Baltimore pastors as he could, and spoke to many of them.

We will continue to do a lot of work, especially through Bishop (Denis) Madden and the city pastors, especially on the west side,” he said.

“First of all, let’s pray. ... We need to strengthen our communities that they might be a force of peace. We need to participate vigorously in a citywide dialogue on the systemic issues that have really bubbled up to the surface here,” the archbishop said. “It seems that’s our role in this.”

Father Donald Sterling, pastor of New All Saints parish in Liberty Heights, said the violence of April 27 “speaks to me very loudly that we still have the great divide in this community, with the haves and have nots. Obviously the remnants of racism still affect us in tremendous ways. ... “I think it raises opportunity for development of some kind of ongoing conversation between the city, communities and church.”

He said the Catholic community could be part of a constructive call for minority communities to come together. He hopes that a group of faith and community leaders would be meeting to discuss the concerns and take action.

“My hope,” Father Sterling said, “is that we do it with others in the church and community rather than as individuals.”

About a block from the intersection of Pennsylvania and North avenues where a CVS Pharmacy was looted and burned, police stood arm to arm to cordon off the street. Walking with a broom in her hand, Tracy Strum and friends were helping.

“Everything from last night is getting cleaned up,” she said.

She added that the next thing is that the city needs to clean the area’s alleys, because that trash has been there well before the previous night.

“When you live in the gutter,” she said, “you act like it.”

Strum, a resident of Anne Arundel County, grew up and went to school in the area. “This is my city,” she said, explaining why she had gotten up at 7 a.m. to be part of the cleanup.

In that same area, with the police line just yards away and a police helicopter circling overhead, Marvin Jones and Minister Donald Bebens from First Baptist Church of Pimlico in Park Heights knelt in prayer beside a five-foot wooden cross with a crown atop it.

As Jones delivered a nonstop litany, he prayed, “We trust in the blood of Christ to set souls free. They call them ‘thugs’ but they are souls to be saved.”



Members of the Prayerstop ministry of First Baptist Church of Pimlico gather near a police line on North Ave. in West Baltimore April 28. (Karen Osborne | CR Staff)

As they prayed, they were joined by neighbors who stopped their cleanup efforts to kneel with them. Christina Campbell said, “I just came down here to try to clean up, put it back together. Otherwise, it’s just another breakdown.”

Cristal Onair, who lives across the street added, “God is going to fix this.”

Stephen Scott, who lives just around the corner from St. Gregory the Great, greeted Archbishop Lori when he visited the Harvey and Jeanette Weinberg Sandtown-Winchester Senior Center April 28. “It’s sad, so sad when it comes down to this and it hurts everybody,” Scott said of the violence.

Shirley Washington, who works at the senior center, said she hopes those who participated in the violence will realize what they have done. “When it all settles down, you’ll think about what you did wrong then.”

At St. Bernardine Parish, a previously scheduled three-night revival opened April 27, the night of the riots. Pastor Monsignor Richard Bozzelli, said, "I think we're all heartbroken over what's happening, but we're going to keep our faith in God and keep praying, keep looking for truth and answers, and look for peace as well."

He said the revival would continue, with the second night, April 28, the "youth night" portion of the revival, in partnership with St. Frances Academy.

"The church is going to be open," he said. "We're going to be praying. Even if there are only three people in the church, we're going to pray."

Dr. B. Curtis Turner, a deacon and principal of St. Frances Academy, said the students were committed to the revival's youth night. "We're trying to put as much word out as we can that this is a place for positive youths to come and pray.

"I guess God saw it coming and set up some healing in a part of the city," he said. "And our kids are proud to be a part of it."

Staff Writer Erik Zygmunt contributed to this article.

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