

Trayvon Martin case shows everyone deserves justice, peace



AP photo

Fourteen years ago, one of the my closest childhood friends, Anthony Jamaal Thomas, was stabbed and killed for his Eddie Bauer jacket coming out of a movie theater in a mall.

For a few days after, Anthony was mentioned in headlines across the Washington area and, then, was forgotten as the media moved to the next tragic murder.

The people who actually knew Anthony – his friends and his family – can never forget Anthony’s 20 years on the planet. Pictures of him in a St. Jerome’s basketball jersey linger in our thoughts even now. He was a natural-born leader.

But, thanks to murder, he became a statistic – another young black male dead through violence.

I’ve thought a lot of about Anthony recently as the shooting death of Trayvon Martin has received national attention. George Zimmerman, a community watch captain in Sanford, Florida, shot an unarmed Martin in the chest Feb. 26, 2012. Zimmerman said Martin was exhibiting suspicious behavior in his neighborhood and the two reportedly had an altercation before the gun was fired. Martin reportedly had just some Skittles on him as he died. Zimmerman has not been charged with anything following the shooting and that has caused people to call for justice.

The country’s race wounds have been opened up again as some believe Zimmerman was using racial profiling in his work. Details of the case have not been fully sorted and that’s one of the reasons Martin’s defenders are calling for Zimmerman’s prosecution.

The words “Justice for Trayvon” have been used a lot in recent days. Many people – including basketball megastar LeBron James – have taken to wearing hoodie sweatshirts, Trayvon’s signature clothing, in support of Martin’s memory.

On one hand, this civic activism is applause-worthy. Seeing crowds of people gather together to care about one life is inspiring in many ways.

We all should care that someone, especially our young men and women, are dying.

Here in Baltimore, young people are slain at an alarming rate.

According to BaltimoreSun.com, there have been 38 homicides in Baltimore City during 2012. That's a murder every two days. Fifteen have happened during March's 27 days alone. There were 196 in 2011, down from 223 the year before. Still, that's no reason for celebration. That's a call for justice and something much bigger.

Baltimore routinely ranks among large cities with the highest rate of violent crime per capita. Young boys and girls are raised in urban environments across the country where they fight for their survival and learn early that emerging from their situations is not easy.

Too many are killed, make the nightly news and are forgotten the next day. As with Anthony, they become a statistic. The person fades away and the cycle continues.

As Catholics, we are called to defend life from conception to natural death. It's not always a popular position. But, it's one city pastors take seriously.

The Catholic Review has regularly sponsored a gun buy back with longtime city fixtures, Monsignor Damien Nalepa and Third Order Franciscan Father Peter Lyons, heading up the cause.

Monsignor Napela once told The Catholic Review, "My greatest fear is that there is apathy - that this is becoming a common occurrence so it's not even stirring our fear, or outrage."

Unfortunately, apathy is a real concern. We have entire generations of young people desensitized to violence. The more young people see it as less and less a big deal, the more our culture does at large too. No matter if we live in the suburbs or the farms far away from the city, violence is a problem for us all to figure out.

It shouldn't take the awful death of Trayvon Martin to stir a nation to call for justice. Kids die in the streets every day across the country, not because of the color of their skin, but because of the color of their clothes. Sometimes, it's being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Many times, they are caught up in the vicious, violent circle that they think is their only way out of hopelessness. We, as Catholics, must accept the call to change cultures, even when it's not easy.

Murder isn't about statistics. It's about a human life ending.

Trayvon Martin's death is calling people to action. Everyone deserves justice. Everyone deserves peace first, though.

Let's work toward that end first and foremost.