

23rd Sunday A
 St. Peter Claver // St. Pius V Church
 Baltimore, Maryland
 13. IX. 2020

I. Not “One-and-Done”

- A. First, I am happy to return to St. Peter Claver and St. Pius V Parish. Unfortunately, I’m spread a little thin, so I don’t get here often enough. But whenever I do, whether I’m bringing a few hundred bishops with me, or coming over to distribute coats for kids, or simply offering Sunday Mass ... it is always a joy to be united with you in faith and worship. And with you, I want to express the deep gratitude we share for Fr. Ray. Thank you for your priestly love and your dedicated leadership of your parish and for your healing and prophetic presence in this neighborhood and our city!**
- B. What brings me here, today, is a call issued by Bishop Shelton Fabre, Chairman of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee against Racism, a call to set aside the feast of St. Peter Claver, September 9th, as a day of prayer for racial justice in our nation and in our local communities. Our Archdiocesan Racism Workgroup reinforced Bishop Fabre’s call by encouraging us on the feast of St. Peter Claver to pray for the wisdom and strength to uphold the dignity of all peoples and to bring about peace in our communities. Today, we gather in-person and virtually so that as many as possible could participate in this day of prayer and so that we could celebrate more fully the patronal feast of this parish.**
- C. Concern was rightly expressed, however, that this not be a one-off event ... a moment of prayer that is soon forgotten. Our prayer is never “one and done” as they say in college basketball. Prayer is the life-blood of our continual struggle against racism, the dynamic force and animating spirit of all we must do together to achieve racial justice and to open the doors of opportunity for all God’s children. For, “unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it!” (Ps. 127). Or as Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches ... without me you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). Or as St. Paul said, “Rejoice always! Pray without ceasing!” (1 Thess. 5:17). No, our prayer is never done, just as the work the Lord has given us to do is never done.**

II. Building the House

A. And we have a lot of work to do!

The killing of George Floyd and Freddie Gray and far too many others illustrates that COVID-19 is not the only pandemic we have to deal with.

Racism is also a pandemic but it is not a once-in-a-century event ...

It never seems to go away and its symptoms are many, whether it's acts of violence committed against black persons, a dearth of decent housing in many black neighborhoods, a lack of educational and economic opportunity in black communities, discriminatory attitudes, remarks, and jokes – yes, the symptoms are many. Some among us are asymptomatic – they do not appear to be overtly racist but nonetheless harbor racist attitudes and assumptions of privilege in their hearts. They too can be carriers of the sin of racism and they help to spread it in our society.

B. Just as COVID-19 did not stop at the Church's doorstep,

so too the sin of racism has wormed its way into the Church –

whether in the complicity of its former leaders with slavery

or in the *de facto* segregation of parishes, or the failure to attract black vocations,

or a failure to raise up new generations of black leadership in the Church –

... or the refusal of some Catholics to sit near a black person at Mass

... or offer a black person the sign of peace.

Because black lives have been valued less than other lives – and for a long time –

it is time that we, as a united Church community –

rooted in Catholic social teaching – affirm that “Black Lives Matter”.

C. But in the long run, even this affirmation will not be enough.

A battle cry may energize and galvanize

but, of itself, it will not bring about needed change.

For that to happen, yes, we need to raise our voice in the public square,

but we also need to be equally attentive to what is going on in our hearts.

Laws, policies, and resources alone will not bring about the end of racism.

Only the conversion of minds and hearts will win that victory.

Nor can we bring about an end to racism and violence against people of color by acting out in violent and destructive ways.

Peaceful protest is our right and duty as citizens,

but such moments should not be used for personal or political gain.

But neither should we allow such violent acts to distract us from confronting injustice.

D. Here I want to salute the work of the Archdiocesan Racism Workgroup. This dedicated body of women and men have been working for some time to help our whole community of faith to come to terms with racism in our midst and to conduct what is for many an uncomfortable conversation about race among Archdiocesan leaders, in parish communities, and in other ministries ... in the City of Baltimore and the nine Maryland counties that make up the Archdiocese. Led by Sherita Thomas and with the help of outside consultants, this Workgroup is drilling down, seeking to find a way in God's grace to help our local Church, the Archdiocese of Baltimore, to do better in the future than we have in the past ... yes, we have work to do!

III. The Spirit of Our Work We Must Do Together

- A. How then, and in what spirit, shall we do the work that lies before us? On August 28th, the 57th anniversary of the historic March on Washington, Archbishop Wilton Gregory spoke movingly of the enduring legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He emphasized that Dr. King carried out his mission in the spirit of the Beatitudes, never wavering for a moment in his passion for racial justice yet remaining resolutely dedicated to non-violence and the work of building bridges.**
- B. We see the same spirit of Christian love – to an heroic degree – in St. Peter Claver ... St. Peter Claver who understood so deeply the elemental evil of human slavery, and therefore, focused all his energy and love on ministering to those human beings, those children of God who arrived in Columbia half dead. St. Peter Claver baptized some 300,000 enslaved people and heard the confessions of 5,000 enslaved people per year, witnessing by his life to the human dignity of those whom many regarded as mere chattel. His heart surged with indignation at what he saw every day. He not only ministered to the slaves but he also defend their fundamental rights. So it was that he worked tirelessly to improve the lives of those he served, and heroically sought an abolition of the slave trade. St. Peter Claver remains a model for us today.**
- C. So too, in the today's Scripture readings, the Word of God instructs us not to go about the work that is before us in an angry or vengeful way. Rather, the spirit of justice and love we hope to engender in our whole community must also animate our minds, our hearts, our attitudes. Thus, the Book of Sirach warns us against the corrosive effects of anger,**

even as St. Paul urges us to live, not for ourselves, but for others – including those who remain enmeshed in the sin of racism. In the Gospel reading from St. Matthew, Jesus tells us that we should forgive our enemies – not seven times but seven times seventy times – that is to say, as completely as God loves us and forgives us our sins.

- D. Like Dr. King and like St. Peter Claver we must be resolute in rooting out racism and we must never mistake God’s mercy and a spirit of forgiveness as a cover or as an excuse for the prolongation of racism. Yet, if we hope to change minds and hearts, if we hope that the beloved community of our Church will become a model for how the larger society might address the sin of racism, then we ourselves must embody that spirit of mercy which in God’s grace has the power to change lives – our own and the lives of others. Yes, we have work to do ... a lot of work to do ... but if we unite in faith and prayer – not once but every day of our lives – and resolve to walk together – we can be sure that God will walk with us and, “if God is for us, who can be against us” (Rom. 8:31).

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!