



The Black Catholic Ministry Commission

of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

STATEMENT IN RESPONSE TO ACTS OF VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

On July 11th members of the Black Catholic Ministry Commission of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee gathered for our monthly meeting and spent part of it reflecting on recent events in our country: the fatal shooting of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota as well as the murder of five law enforcement officers in Dallas, Texas. Even as we began to draft this statement, there were reports that several more law enforcement officers had been killed and others wounded in Baton Rouge. The Commission wanted to share with you some of our reflections on these events and on the Black Lives Matter Movement in light of Catholic Social Teachings.

It is no secret that in many places throughout our nation there are tensions between law enforcement and people in the communities that they are sworn “to serve and protect”. These tensions have given rise to further conflicts and the creation of a “Black Lives Matter” versus “Blue Lives Matter” dichotomy. While we cannot ignore or excuse the profound challenges and issues within the black community, (e.g. black on black crime), the focus of this statement is to address the rising tension between many of our brothers and sisters in the black community and our brothers and sisters in law enforcement.

We condemn all these acts of violence. We recognize that the vast majority of law enforcement officers are not brutal, uncaring and reckless in the exercise of their considerable power and authority; and contrary to stereotypes and media images, the vast majority of Black people are not malevolent, lazy and looking for a handout. However, we are deeply disturbed that so many interactions between people of color and law enforcement have resulted in death and that there often appears to be little legal or professional accountability.

Every life in this country should mean something – from conception to natural death. “Black Lives Matter” is not a declaration of self-importance; instead, it is more a declaration of vulnerability. Inherently, all lives cannot matter until black lives matter. Regrettably, our nation’s history, current events, and a vast array of data on human well-being (income, wealth, health, education, etc.) demonstrate the opposite.

Our communities need the police. We are grateful for their service and acknowledge their jobs are at times very dangerous. However, when their actions result in numerous senseless deaths of African Americans, we are all affected by this. When this happens, the sense of trust and common purpose that is essential for creating and maintaining healthy communities is undermined. As one body, we as church are called to express social justice principles, and we are called to lend our support to the Black Lives Matter Movement as we know that one of their foundational principles is to stand up for those who have been left out and unheard.

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The Baobab Tree is native of many African countries and is believed to be thousands of years old.
It symbolizes endurance and wisdom.



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Addressing racism and the many forms of *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination, particularly in our criminal justice system, is the responsibility of all of us and especially our religious leaders and lawmakers.

Acknowledging the great complexity and deep historical and cultural roots of these issues, we would like to focus on one area – law enforcement – and suggest five concrete things that could be done to lessen the risks of fatal encounters between officers and the people in our communities whom they are sworn to serve and protect.

1. Increase the diversity in our police departments so that their forces better reflect the communities they serve.
2. Improve and make more transparent the legal and departmental mechanisms of accountability for officers and their supervisors in cases of misconduct and especially the use of excessive or deadly force.
3. Improve and expand training in cultural sensitivity, de-escalation of conflict, and other areas that can help to lessen the risk of violent interactions.
4. Provide more opportunities for officers to build healthy and cooperative relationships with communities, especially with our youth.
5. Strengthen community and family life which are struggling against an array of social, political, cultural and spiritual forces that seek to undermine them.

We further suggest that the principles of Catholic Social Teachings can assist us in these efforts:

- Life and Dignity of the Human Person—Black lives matter because all lives matter, and until they do, the value of all human life will be diminished.
- Call to Family, Community and Participation – Healthy and engaged communities nurture healthy families and strong families help build healthy communities.
- Option for the Poor and Vulnerable--Even after four centuries on this continent, people of African descent are still disproportionately poor and vulnerable to both crime and the use of excessive and deadly force by law enforcement officers. Reversing and changing these trends will demand intentional and sustained effort and the investment of resources - not over years but over generations.
- The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers--Many of our communities lack significant opportunities and access to jobs with family-supporting wages and benefits. At the very least, building an efficient and affordable system of public transportation can at least help people to get to where those jobs can be found. In addition, employers must open their hearts and minds to hiring people from backgrounds other than their own.
- Solidarity--In a community as segregated by race and class as Metro Milwaukee, we need to develop ways for people to have honest and respectful conversations so that we can build a stronger sense of the common good.

It is our prayer that People of God within our communities might gain a better understanding of what the “Black Lives Matter” movement is all about. With that understanding, we hope that together we will begin honest conversations about confronting injustice and our universal call to be the heart, the hands and the voice of Christ in our world.

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