

## RACISM

The past month has been very difficult for me in terms of what is happening in our society. Witnessing the murder of George Floyd-- watching that video of yet another Black life being taken-- was heart breaking. I feel so angry and tired of how people of color are treated due to racism. Fr. Byron Massingale and Fr. Joseph Brown have both talked about how "tired and exhausted" they feel about what is happening to people of color. As I started talking with other people of color, I realized that this was an overall theme. We are all very tired of being treated unequally because of the color of our skin. These conversations always bring me to think about all of the Black lives that have been snuffed out as casualties of racism. My soul cries out for Ahmaud Arbery, Sean Bell, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Taron Martin. Our brothers and sister are no longer with us because of the color of their skin, which boils down to racism.

In my discussions with others, I realized that I was having a problem articulating what I was feeling, so I turned to Jeremiah 8:21-22 and 9:1: *"My heart has been crushed because my people are crushed. I mourn, I am completely dismayed. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Are there no doctors there? Why then have my people not been healed?" "I wish my head were of a well of water and my eyes a fountain of tears so that I could cry day and night for my people who have been killed."* I found so much comfort in this Scripture, because again, it helps me to articulate how I was feeling. I am going to leave a question after each paragraph I write for your own personal reflection and growth.

QUESTION: *How did the murder of George Floyd personally affect you? Was his death a direct result of racism?*

I don't believe we can have an open and honest discussion about racism 'till we get honest about its existence in our society and in our Vincentian community. I see the impact of racism every day in the community in which I live and work. I see it in all the liquor stores, corner stores and fast food places that sell us food that is

not good for us. In most of our neighborhoods, we have food deserts, meaning there is a lack of affordable and nutritious food. We have no grocery store chains in the community. As a result, we purchase what is available at corner stores. This leads to poor health. These stores are rarely owned by people of color. How is it that businesses in our own neighborhoods are not owned by any people who look like us? Other ethnic groups come in, make their money and then leave our neighborhoods. It is so ironic that just 2 streets over from Immaculate Conception the neighborhood is white, and there are no corner stores, no fast food places with unhealthy, overpriced food. Instead, you see people sitting outside having good meals at outdoor restaurants. Two completely different worlds within the same neighborhood, separated only by 2 streets.

QUESTION: *Have you noticed racial or economic disparities within the same neighborhood on different streets? What are some ways in which you see a difference in standards of living?*

Covid-19 has really pulled back the curtain to reveal inequalities in our society. We can look at the impact that the virus is having on people of color alone. It is seen in the education system, the healthcare system, the socio-economic system. People of color are the most impacted because of healthcare issues that existed even before COVID came along. Obesity, hypertension, diabetes, asthma, etc. are all issues often associated with poor nutrition and lack of access to good health care in our communities. While we are in the midst of this global pandemic, many blacks do not have the luxury of working from home because they work in the service industries and are essential workers. This places them at greater risk of infection and greater risk of serious complications from COVID, which in turn impacts our communities. Again, we come back to disparities resulting from racism, woven into all parts of our society.

QUESTION: Do you see the disparities in different systems that negatively impact people of color?

Racism is active and alive. We can no longer pretend that it doesn't exist. It has come more to the forefront as people have become emboldened to commit aggressive and harmful acts toward blacks to hold us back, to oppress us and control us.

I have memories from a young age around what I now understand was racism. I remember the religious sisters always called us (black boys) "boy" so much, I thought this was my name. I remember how they would make us wear gum on our noses if we were caught chewing in class, or they would hit us in the head with erasers which were full of chalk. They would always remind us that they did not have to work with "you people". These are memories dating back to grade school. Thankfully, not all sisters mistreated us. We had some that were wonderful to us, and I am grateful for them. They helped shape me into being who I am today.

When I was discerning whether or not to become a Vincentian, I had become close to the assistant pastor, who was very supportive of me in this process. He asked the pastor if I could have dinner and prayer a couple of times a week with them. The pastor said "no". I only had dinner once throughout my discernment process. He gave me no support. The Daughters of Charity, however, invited me to have prayer and dinner with them 2 times a week. I remember being in Niagara in our reception hall with the students, and there was a priest who would tell a joke about black people using the "N" word. This really affected me. Parishioners would come to me and ask if I was smoking marijuana in my room, something the pastor had told them I was doing. As recent as three years ago, when I had my accident, I felt the impact of racism very hard. The nursing staff and another employee noticed that I was not being treated like my other brothers. I was only being given Tylenol for pain, which did not help. I remember not getting the pain killers that were prescribed to me by my doctor at Johns Hopkins. They were withheld from me until some of the nurses stepped up and made a fuss about it, arguing that I had a right to them. It was even hard for me to get baked chicken to eat because I did not eat red meat or pork. I was told by the white chef on staff that he couldn't cook just a couple of pieces of chicken; however, it was not a problem for the black

chef to cook it for me. I simply was not given the best care in my condition. My physical therapist never contacted my surgeon about my condition and needs. I only found this out when I got back to Baltimore. I have no doubt that if I had been white, I would have been treated with more respect, and I would have received better medical attention.

QUESTION:            *How do we treat people of color in our Vincentian community, and how do we treat those who are our employed by the Vincentians?*

I believe that this is a very scary time that we are living in. We as Vincentians can no longer remain silent about injustices that happen to people of color, because if they are affected, we are all affected. If I cannot be free, then neither can you. I don't want for us to be afraid of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. I know some people will say "all lives matter". While it is true all lives do matter, we are in the midst of a crisis of senseless murders of blacks at the hands of those who do not value our lives.

When many whites saw what happened to George Floyd and the protests that followed, instead of being outraged at this violent act of racism, they instead shifted the focus to the aftermath of looting that occurred. This was a way to change the narrative of what had taken place. It is a tragedy because it denies the tragedy of racism and turns to blame its victims and those who speak out against it. This is why racism presents such a challenge for us to deal with today. Whites are often very uncomfortable and defensive when discussing racism because it involves acknowledging its impact, avoiding accountability, and because it challenges the way they think. Many whites fear that that when people of color gain, white people lose.

We must remember: Jesus didn't come so that we could be comfortable. The thief came only to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus assures us that he came that we may have life and that we may all live it to the fullest.

I know that it is very easy to focus on looting and on some of the violence played out in the media that is taking place because of the unrest following recent tragic events, but we have to gain focus. Martin Luther King said, "...A riot is the language of the unheard." That is what people of color want: to be heard and to be treated as equal. This is what we should all want for the body of Christ. Racism is an evil we must overcome with love and with understanding. Nelson Mandela said, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People learn to hate and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love." That is our charge. We must learn how to love!

QUESTION:            *How are you loving today?*