Opinion

News



Philonise Floyd, brother of George Floyd, speaks during his brother's public viewing at The Fountain of Praise church in Houston June 8. (CNS/Reuters/Adrees Latif)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Are we at a turning point in our nation's long struggle with race? Will this time be different, as many hope? Or will the protests, like the protests that followed the school shootings in Parkland, Florida, effect little legal or political change? And, what role can the church play in helping the country rid itself of the scourge of racism?

A new Washington Post poll indicates that most Americans (74%), including most Republicans (53%), support the protests. More importantly, 69% of Americans now say that Floyd's murder is evidence of "broader problems" in our society, compared with only 43% of Americans who thought so in 2014 at the time of the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. That is progress.

It is also evidence of progress that most of those protesting in the streets the past two weeks are young people and many of them are white. It is easy for us older folk to look at the way racism found ways to survive the civil rights movement, survive the fight to make the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a national holiday, survive eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, and feel like it is never going away. It is easy to watch one's hopes for an end to racism disintegrate as you consider that Obama was replaced by a president whose racist attitudes and political strategies harken back to George Wallace. It is easy to worry that Obama's victory was not part of some larger victory over racism.



A Franciscan takes part in a prayerful protest outside the White House June 8 in Washington. (CNS/Bob Roller)

But, for a 20-year-old, Obama was president for more than a third of their time on this Earth and most of their formative years. To them, Obama was the norm and Trump the exception. Young people are more likely to grow up in an interracial neighborhood and in an interracial family than was the case when I grew up. In 2015, the Pew Center did a study that showed the rate of interracial marriages had increased five-fold since the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Loving* v. *Virginia*, the 1967 ruling that declared Virginia's legal ban on interracial marriage unconstitutional. Seventeen percent of all new marriages were interracial in 2015, including 18% of all black newlyweds, 27% of all Hispanic newlyweds and 29% of all Asian newlyweds. Among Hispanics and Asians born in the U.S., the rates were even higher, 39% and 46% respectively. Yet still more promising is that there is only a modest difference between the intermarriage rates of college educated and non-college educated Americans: This development is not, like many attitudinal indicators, affected by education levels.

These positive trends are the backdrop, also, for the outrage so many young people rightly feel and rightly express after watching the horrific video of the murder of George Floyd. How is it that racism, murderous racism, is still with us and still so

systemic? Many times you hear people refer to racism as America's "original sin," but the danger with that description is that there is no solution to original sin this side of the grave. Is racism really indelible like original sin? Is there no baptism to wash it away?

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Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, in a powerful statement released this week, reflected on his time in Washington during the 1968 riots and the progress we have made since, but then posed this sober admonition: "But to know that fifty years later four police officers would see themselves entitled to murder a black man with impunity makes clear how far we must yet go to achieve racial equality."

The cardinal rightly pointed to the undeniable fact that racism is systemic. "George Floyd's death makes clear that racist premises and attitudes, often implicit, are woven through basic structures — political, legal, economic, cultural and religious — in the United States."

O'Malley went on to indicate the unique role that the teachings of our Catholic faith can help us to rid ourselves of this curse. First, our belief in human dignity is one of the core principles of our social teaching:

> We recognize that the Catholic Church in the United States must contend with our historical complicity in slavery and our need for racial healing. However, an important part of the legacy of the Catholic faith is our social teaching. The Catholic Church is a community of people of all colors, nationalities and ethnicities. Catholic moral teaching is based on the fact that all people — without regard to race, religion, ethnicity or nationality — are created in the image of God. This teaching rejects any form of racism, personal or systemic. Our faith calls us to leadership in breaking down barriers and standing against injustice. To violate human dignity is to dishonor the presence of Christ in each person.

It is important to note that the cardinal began with a confession of our church's failure to honor our teaching. Grace only enters our heart when we have confessed our sins and rid it of pride.

O'Malley then marries our Catholic belief in human dignity with our unquenchable commitment to the sanctity of all human life:

> The killing of George Floyd is painful evidence of what is and has been at stake for African Americans — the failure of society in too many ways to protect their lives and the lives of their children. As Catholics we are taught to nurture and protect life from its inception to its natural end and at every moment in-between. The demonstrations and protests of these days have been calls for justice and heart wrenching expressions of deep emotional pain from which we cannot turn away. They call us to affirm the inestimable value of every person's life. They call us to redouble our commitment to foster respect and justice for all people. They call us to uphold and defend the truth that Black Lives Matter.

The cardinal's statement is a necessary and firm rebuttal to any attempt to simply see the protests in our streets in partisan terms or as an extension of the culture wars. Black lives are at risk from police violence in ways white lives are not. Period. And that fact is an intolerable fact against which we are right to rage and sinful to minimize.

Will it be different this time? We don't know. But Catholics must commit to the cause of racial justice because it is the right thing to do, because our teaching compels us to do so, regardless of what the results may be. It is a moment to contemplate the just judgment of God when we meet him face to face.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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