



Remarks of President Francesco C. Cesareo
Listening Session
June 3, 2020

This is indeed a period of great pain and suffering in our country and for members of our community.

Since March we have all experienced isolation, separation and a loss of a sense of belonging. The tragic death of George Floyd and what has transpired across the country since then has brought to light the unfortunate reality of isolation, separation and lack of belonging that people of color have experienced, and continue to experience, in our society every day. We are horrified and outraged as we witness before our eyes the murder of yet another black man with a total disregard for his worth as a fellow human being.

The death of George Floyd is one in a litany of similar losses of life over the course of several years - Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castille, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin...and too many others. All of this points to the stark reality that racism is not a thing of the past – it is like a cancer that is eating away at the very fabric of society – a real and ever present danger that cannot be ignored, but rather that must be confronted. It makes us uncomfortable, as it should.

As Fr. Bryan Massingale, a professor at Fordham University wrote this week, “Let it become agonizing. Let it move you to tears, to anger, to guilt, to shame, to embarrassment.” As Jill Lepore’s new history of the United States makes clear, racism is America’s original sin, a truth echoed by Pope St. John Paul II during his papal visit to the U.S. in 1999, when he called racism, “one of the most persistent and destructive evils of the nation.” We are witnessing that destructive evil at this very moment.

The reaction across the country and among our Assumption community has been sadness. Disappointment. Disgust. Fear. Anger. To our students of color, I cannot fully comprehend the depths of your fear. Your sadness. Your anger. Only those that have experienced the agony of discrimination are capable of such. It is a pain that many Assumption students have endured, but an unbearable one that is foreign to others.

Upon viewing the videos from Minneapolis and near Brunswick, Georgia, I, was broken-hearted. I felt sadness that life was again so callously taken. Disappointment that in 2020, the hope of progress in healing our nation of its humiliating past on race relations has continued to digress. And finally, anger. This recurring scenario begs one to question how can our society fail to appreciate the inherent dignity of the human person?

When an individual suffers in such a way, humanity is diminished. Our conscience must be stirred to work tirelessly for justice and to confront racism. We must acknowledge that while progress has been made towards equality in our nation, there are still significant structural and systemic problems that perpetuate racism which need to undergo meaningful reform. This requires that we look deep within ourselves, at the ways we have perpetuated this moral stain on our society, whether we have been aware of it or not.

If we do not seek to confront this reality honestly and remain silent bystanders to the evil around us, we ourselves are perpetuating and accepting this evil.

The disregard for black lives is an affront to their inherent dignity as individuals created in the image and likeness of God. Every black life is precious endowed with gifts and talents that contribute to the world in positive ways and for this reason that life matters and is to be cherished, respected and offered the same rights everyone deserves. To be deprived of that dignity and that life is counter to Catholicism's belief that all life is to be respected and defended. In this way, the sin of racism is a life issue.

As a Catholic institution, we have an obligation to make clear the position of Catholicism that any ideology that advocates racism is a grave sin against the dignity of the human person and the teaching of Jesus that calls us to love our sisters and brothers as ourselves.

We have seen much anger expressed in the last week as a manifestation of the frustration that the black community feels as a result of a never-ending experience of humiliation, indignity and inequality simply because of skin color. We need to understand this anger and pain. We need to hear the legitimate concerns being raised in protest. But anger can lead to violence which becomes a destructive energy that can be counter-productive and distract us from facing head-on the problem of racism.

There is an important difference between peaceful, non-violent protest and those who have used this moment as an opportunity for the type of lawless violence that has resulted in fires, lootings, and shootings. These acts have not advanced a dialogue seeking understanding. Instead, they have incited more pain and suffering. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Hate begets hate; violence begets violence; toughness begets a greater toughness. We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love." Just as we must condemn racism, we must also condemn violence in all its forms. This too is our moral imperative. We must find peaceful ways to address the concerns of people of color that have been ignored for too long so as to resolve them as quickly as possible. We must take our anger and channel it toward good – towards healing.

Amid this contentious time, as an educational institution rooted firmly in the Catholic liberal arts tradition, it is our responsibility to provide hope – hope for a better tomorrow. Know that these are not hollow words shared only to comfort or appease. They are words that must guide our work throughout the campus community to form individuals of high character and understanding so that when they venture out into the world they, too, can change hearts and minds. The liberal arts education that we offer is the framework for addressing the problems of racism because this education rests on the fundamental questions that every person and every society must answer – what is the good? What is evil? What comprises the common good? What does it mean to be a civilized people? How does moral judgement and prudence inform my actions? What is right and what is inherently wrong, evil?

Through this type of education we can make a difference. We are forming our students to be the leaders of tomorrow who will be the catalyst for change. We can use this education to challenge those who perpetuate hate. We can use this education to work to reform the structures that continue to repress our brothers and sisters. We can use this education to build bridges of mutual respect and trust in our society.

In the absence of a national leader to comfort those pained by the events of the recent weeks and the nation's shameful history on race, let *us* do better. Let reform start here with *you*. That is my call to you.

We must not be discouraged by the enormity of this challenge, rather embrace it. We can make meaningful progress here on campus – within our community – to encourage dialogue and understanding. While we have made progress at Assumption in confronting issues of race, we are not perfect, and we can do better as an institution in raising awareness and our consciences to the experiences of people of color in our community. We have had a long-standing program of racial healing dialogues.

A few years ago, I established a Presidential Task Force on Race, which is now a permanent committee. This Task Force explored how we can prepare for a future rich with a more racially diverse student body. That future is beginning to be realized as we continue to welcome a number of individuals whose unique perspective enhances the undergraduate experience.

One significant outcome of that Task Force was the Division for Student Success. Through the Division, we eliminate barriers to education by supporting students' academic success, resilience, retention, persistence to graduation and employability for our students of color.

Of note in this Division is the Cross Cultural Center, which supports and sustains an environment that encourages and embraces the contributions of students from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. And the ALANA group has made tremendous progress in advancing a dialogue on race here on campus; a dialogue that is increasingly important as we struggle to understand the pervasiveness of the sin of racism. In addition, we added a position of Director of ALANA and First Generation Student Success, which will be in place in the Fall with Judy Heersink serving in that role.

While much progress has been made, much remains to be done. We can and will do better.

In their 2018 pastoral letter on Racism, *Open Wide our Hearts*, the bishops of the United States wrote, "As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice."

And so this evening we start by listening and attempting to better understand the daily struggle of those who endure the sin of discrimination. We listen to the cries of the protestors, to their stories, to try to understand their pain and recognize their calls for justice and for change that is long overdue. We listen to your stories. We do this in a spirit of support and of love, united as one Assumption community. And we pray, we pray for George Floyd and his family, for all those who have lost their lives needlessly because of hatred and bigotry and we pray for the members of our law enforcement agencies who carry out their duties with respect and with honor.

Thank you