

“Statement of Bishop Daniel E. Thomas on The Death of George Floyd and the Resulting Aftermath”

“I can’t breathe.” The harrowing plea of George Floyd as he was violently robbed of his life, now seared into our minds, hearts and souls; and the chanting of that phrase in protests, many tragically marked by violence and vandalism, are a stark reminder that hatred, racism and injustice are alive and well. Attacks on human life cannot be tolerated because each human life has inherent dignity and all human life is sacred. The right to life is the first and most fundamental principle of human rights that leads us actively to work for a greater respect for human life and a greater commitment to justice and peace.

United with Catholics throughout the Diocese of Toledo and together with all people of good will, we denounce in the strongest terms immoral actions which are the poison fruit of racism; and we denounce immoral actions which are born of hatred and result in unbridled violence. "Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist" *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call To Love, A Pastoral Letter Against Racism* (USCCB, Nov 2018, p. 18).

While it might be easy to denounce racism and violence in a written statement, in a catchphrase on a poster, or in a political call for systemic change; it is far from easy to stop and examine where they have their roots: in one’s own heart, thoughts, intentions, speech and attitudes. It is never easy for anyone to identify any sin or vice and work courageously to eradicate it, never easy to work to replace it with goodness and virtue. Only such an examination leads to a "genuine conversion of heart, a conversion that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society" (p. 7). Only personal ongoing conversion from evil and sin can lead to the healing so desperately needed today.

Pope Francis exhorts us: “My friends, we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life. At the same time, we have to recognize that the violence of recent nights is self-destructive and self-defeating. Nothing is gained by violence and so much is lost...let us implore the national reconciliation and peace for which we yearn.”

As we pledge our prayers for the repose of George Floyd, for all who have lost their lives, and for their grieving loved ones, we pray together for our broken and wounded nation. Most of all do we pray that every person so disturbed and outraged by the events of these last days will work to promote and protect that peace and justice which is the right of all citizens, no matter their race. We cannot condone the brutality of some in law enforcement which led to the horrific death of George Floyd; we cannot condone the violence of some protesters which brutalizes and ruins the livelihoods of ordinary citizens.

“If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together” (1Cor 12:26). In this moment we are all suffering, united in particular with the suffering African American community. In this moment, we cannot lose sight of George Floyd’s struggle to breathe, nor be deaf to the “I can’t breathe” of the countless voices of those for whom there is no one to speak. Nor can we be blind to those who try to manipulate this moment of suffering to promote an agenda of hatred and foment division to pit us one against the other.

As members of the human race, in this moment, it feels difficult to breathe. The violence we have all witnessed has left us breathless. We look forward to that day when, moved by the Holy Spirit, the Breath of God, we can stand united as one human family in a society moving toward hope and healing. We look forward to that day when the harrowing plea “I can’t breathe” has been transformed into a full throated “I can breathe freely!”; where each human person can breathe deeply of the pure air of mercy, love, harmony, peace, justice, understanding and respect for each human person!