



Franciscan Friars

PROVINCE OF SAINT BARBARA ♦ Office of the Provincial Minister

*An Open Letter to
My White Sisters and Brothers
Who are Roman Catholic*

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

May the Lord give you peace.

I am writing this open letter to you as a fellow Roman Catholic since I am assuming that because of our faith tradition we hold certain truths in common, that we are all deeply loved unconditionally by God, that we all have a complete dignity that recognizes we are made in the image and likeness of God, that all of us are truly brothers and sisters to each other. We seek the common good. This letter, while addressed to those of my faith tradition, is also offered to believers in other traditions and to nonbelievers in the hope that we may all be in dialogue.

These past few days in our country have been simply incredible. The continuing economic free fall of our economy with over 40 million unemployed, the continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic and the horrendous death of so many and the latest incidents of systemic racism is on everyone's mind. We know that both in the economy and in the reality of the pandemic African-Americans, Native people and others of color are disproportionately affected. This is clear. We who are white simply do not experience this systemic racism directly nor do we experience our cultural reality the same way as our brothers and sisters of color.

In our country there is a very long history of violence and oppression against all people of color, especially African-Americans that is a direct result of slavery. The killing of George Floyd is simply the latest act of violence against African-Americans in a very long history. Why have we as a country not made much progress in eradicating the evil of racism? Why is it systemic?

And this is where I begin to have difficulty with this letter because I know there is a part of me that does not want to offend or make others feel uncomfortable, especially other people who are white like me. The truth is that racism continues in our country because it benefits those of us who are white. Period. Full stop. I think we owe it to George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and all those who have died by violence to admit this truth. As a white man I do not like this uncomfortable feeling when I admit this, but the reality is that until I am able to sit with this uncomfortableness, live with it, and ask God to help change my heart, all will continue as it has in the past. To admit to white privilege and realize that I continue to benefit from it is a hard pill to swallow. But if I truly wish to live my faith fully, I need to embrace justice completely, realizing that God's grace will help me. I need to pray for His help realizing that racism is a spiritual wound. We white people need to be outraged

at the racism in our culture and only when enough of us are truly outraged will systemic change take place.

How did I end up in the place I am? I am not an autonomous individual floating in space. I grew up in a particular place, at a particular time in a particular family. I was 13 years old, living in Northcentral Florida, when Martin Luther King was assassinated. At that time my school was still segregated. My mother did not lie awake at night fearing I would be killed by the police when I was a teenager going out at night with my friends. I lived in a completely white world and knew absolutely no African-Americans and no other person of color. I would like to think my family was “good.” I never got a lesson in whiteness, I just picked it up as the way things are and was socialized into a certain view of the world that I would later understand as racist, very racist. All of us have been scared by the social sin around us.

If all that I have written above is true, and I do believe it to be true, then what should I do? What concrete actions may I do? Is there something I could offer to my Catholic sisters and brothers in ways of suggestions? I pledge myself to do the following. I would like to suggest that you and the communities or families you live in develop your own, realizing that what we are attempting might be considered little but we must begin somewhere.

- I need to just sit with being uncomfortable and also realize that is ok if I make other white people uncomfortable. The truth is that I have benefited and continue to benefit from white privilege. This is really hard for me to admit.
- My commitment to justice needs to clearly take priority. I need to stop worrying about offending others when in conversation about racism.
- I need to study and reflect more on racism. I am rather ignorant of the history and realize that the history I learned as a youngest is not complete.
- I need to reflect on my life as friar and a friar-priest in relationship to racial issues. Have I ever given a workshop or lecture on racism? Have I preached on it? I am so embarrassed to say I can not come up with a concrete example.
- I need the courage to speak out or confront my family, friends, and fellow Franciscans when I see or hear bigotry.
- I need to be more pro-life. Pope Francis said on June 3rd “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.” I agree totally.
- I need to support those protestors in the streets who are peaceful. The right to peaceful protest is guaranteed by our Constitution and is a patriotic act. Please be careful and mindful of the pandemic and if I cannot protest myself because of my age and health I can certainly cheer those on who are out. Any violence is morally wrong.
- I need to donate to funds that help protesters who have been out on the streets by giving to bail funds, or legal aid, or other organizations who are struggling against racism and its victims. I can also give some money from my monthly allowance.
- I need to be sure to vote and also encourage others to vote.

Fr. Bryan Massingale in the conclusion of his book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* writes the following: “Social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the outcome of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change things.

What humans break, divide, and separate, we can- with God's help- also heal, unite, and restore. What is now does not have to be. Therein lies the hope. And the challenge."

Let us continue to walk forward together as we struggle for total racial equality. I am under no illusion that this journey will be easy, but we simply must begin once again, building on the struggle of others before us.

Lastly and most importantly I need to pray. We all need to pray. A couple of weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit. Let us all pray that the Spirit will guide us forward and give us the courage to do the right thing. Let us pray for the intersection of the Saints and the Blessed Mother. The US Catholic Bishops recently offered a prayer to overcome racism.

PRAYER TO OVERCOME RACISM

Mary, friend and mother to all, through your Son, God has found a way to unite himself to every human being, called to be one people, sisters and brothers to each other.

We ask for your help in calling on your Son, seeking forgiveness for the times when we have failed to love and respect one another.

We ask for your help in obtaining from your Son, the grace we need to overcome the evil of racism and to build a just society.

We ask for your help in following your Son, so that prejudice and animosity will no longer infect our minds or hearts but will be replaced with a love that respects the dignity of each person.

Mother of the Church, the Spirit of your Son Jesus warms our hearts: pray for us. Amen.

I am convinced that if we give ourselves more completely to the Lord he will come to our aid and help us do what we do not have the strength to do. We are all in this together.

Sincerely and fraternally yours,



Fr. David Gaa, OFM
Minister Provincial of the Province of St. Barbara
President of the Trustees of the Ministries of the Province

June 8, 2020
Oakland, California