

## **+IN THE FACE OF RACISM: What is our response to be in view of what's happening with the death of George Floyd?**

Fr. Michael Casagram

June 4, 2020

Let me admit that I find myself deeply challenged by this presentation. I feel that it touches on an experience that is close to many of us. If one has watched the video of George Floyd being trapped against a car and under the weight of four police officers and one of them with his knee on Floyd's neck, one cannot help but be awfully disturbed. How could anyone do such a thing in the name of law and order, especially when this man is begging for life, crying out again and again, "I cannot breath."

What is going on here and what frightens me is that I see them taking out on this helpless man their pent-up feelings, venting a hatred for this black man who represents the dark side of their own lives. I realize I am taking all of you who are listening to me in a new direction but I feel this is of profound importance for every Christian life. Much of the monastic life is a matter of coming to know yourself with all your weaknesses and failings so as to come to know the power of God and live by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

We all have our shadow side and it is so easy to project this on to others. One of the great benefits of community life is that through living together we come to see those unredeemed parts of ourselves, those areas of our lives we don't want to see or to own. It is much easier to project them onto someone else so as to criticize them and hold them responsible for all the difficulties in your life. A clear instance of this is the tendency to blame the Chinese for the outbreak of the virus and for all that is happening. The result of this is a lot of Asians are suffering dislike and rejection when they have done nothing whatever to cause the spread of the virus.

There is a tendency in all of us to find a shadow figure for this kind of projection and I suspect this is why black people all too easily become the target of our rejection or dislike. They easily come to represent everything we dislike about ourselves and we think to be wrong about the society in which we live. What we dislike most about our lives gets projected onto them. This is a subtle psychological and spiritual tendency in all of us that is real important to see and own.

Dealing with Racism involves being able to withdraw our projections, to see all our brothers and sisters as persons as children of God, worthy of our love and respect. A huge amount of freedom comes when we are able to enter into this perspective which to me means putting on Christ, allowing the love of God to inform all our relationships. We had a wonderful reading called Human Fulfillment as the gift of the Spirit by Fr Louis Bouyer at Vigils this morning. He talks about how the Holy Spirit sets us free from the prison of individuality, breaks down all the barriers.

Let me move from here to some things Merton or Fr Louis has written that may be helpful for our discussion. I have passed on a reference to an article by Alex Mikulich called Thomas Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal." These letters form the basis for Merton's book called Seeds of Destruction written back in 1963. Alex points out that "by 'white liberal,' Merton does not mean partisan progressives. Rather, he means any white person, especially Christians, who claim good intentions toward all people, including African Americans." Alex goes on to say that "Monastic communities (and I read also Lay Cistercians associate with these communities) are fully implicated in the sinfulness of the world... and must bear witness to baptismal conversion into God's love in the midst of worldly egoism and injustice." Reading between the lines I would see Floyd's death as a clear instance of "worldly egoism and injustice."

We are all implicated in the social injustice of our society, all contemplatives whether monastic or lay and all of us have things to do that we may be free of these shackles so as to become living witnesses of a new society. We can have Civil Rights legislation but Merton brings out the fact that "changes in law cannot change minds, hearts, or the source of violence in society." Along with Dr. Martin Luther King, Merton sees a triple evil we are caught in, namely racism, militarism and consumerism which has the great danger of putting profits before people.

What Merton saw and what Pope Francis has called us to be mindful of again and again is as Alex writes, "to resist violence, the contemplative must identify with people who are in any way oppressed or demonized by society. As long as white people clench the status quo and 'persist in clinging its present condition and to its own image of itself as the only acceptable reality, 'then there is no room for real change and 'inevitably there will be violence.'" He goes on to point out that "if society is going to fully respect African Americans as human beings, not as a

projection of the fears or ideals of white people, ‘then *that society is going to be radically changed.*’ Merton sees that racial justice will demand major sacrifices on behalf of white people, including loss of relative economic advantage.”

This will only happen if two conditions are met, namely 1) A complete reform of the social system which permits and breeds such injustices, 2) This reform must be carried out under the inspiration of the Negro whose providential time has arrived, and who has received from God enough light, ardor, and spiritual strength to free the white man in freeing himself from the white man.” They must be allowed to thrive as human being is all this is going to happen.

Let me draw on one last paragraph from Alex’s article: “Merton calls whites to practice ‘Christ’s kingdom of humility’ by turning our full attention to people of color in the fullness of their humanity, as they are—not as whites imagine, fear, or project them to be. ..[This] means that whites must learn from African Americans about the ways that we whites are imprisoned both in a false idealization of ourselves as racially innocent and to a false demonization of African Americans. Merton invites white Americans to see ourselves as African Americans have seen and experienced us through history. When whites see ourselves as African Americans do, then we may see where Jesus stands.”

If we stand where Jesus stands then we will be doing all that we can to deal with Racism in this country. Let me end these reflections of Merton on this note for I think it is here that each of us can do a great deal to improve the conflict going on all around us. We must enter into the Christ consciousness of Blacks if we want to end the sad climate we are faced with today.

There are many opportunities for all of us to bring an end to injustice in our world if we are attentive. We have only to take a close look at our own encounters with persons of Black or Asian background and review our interaction with them. There are occasions when we can support persons working for racial justice and at least indicating to them our verbal support.

Our daily lives have many encounters and if we become more and more aware of our attitude toward those around us we have many occasions to allow our hearts to be purified of unchristian feelings and judgments of others. If we will but make every effort to be inclusive and open to others there are all kinds of kindness and understanding we can show them, making them a loved part of the human family. Often enough as most of us know from human experience, what is needed is

simply someone willing to hear and sympathize with our human pain. Often enough this is all that is necessary for the person to find their way through the isolation and rejection they have experienced.

It seems to be this is all about God consciousness, letting ourselves be a loving support that allows others to become fully human and enabled to use the gifts with which they have been endowed. Healthy and abiding relationships are formed and we become true messengers of the gospel for our day and time. We will realize our own full potential as children of God, persons who are carriers of grace to all around us. It is for this that we have been destined as Christians.