

Today I want to preach on the protests. [These are my thoughts, not the parish's, Archbishop's, or Catholic Church's.] I see events that are very inspiring – but also something that I find troubling in the bigger picture. First the inspiring: overcoming fear. Jesus tells us in the Gospel, “Fear no one.” Certainly, the violence accompanying some protests is destructive, not only to the businesses ransacked, but to the protest movement's persuasiveness. It needs to stop – and seems largely to have done so. But that's not the main point here. The killing of George Floyd has highlighted the fear black Americans and other minorities have of unjust violence at the hands of the police and the larger American society (we can't just blame the police). I want to start by looking at that injustice from a historical perspective.

It is simply a historical fact that racism has been a big part of our history from the beginning. I speak from knowledge gained earning my doctorate in Colonial American history before entering the seminary. There are some Americans today who go too far and say that racism is

at the center of American history, that the American Revolution was fought to protect slavery, that the American project itself is irredeemably racist, etc. I don't believe that's true. I would say the central theme of American history is actually what I call "the defiant freedom of the individual."

But it is true that slavery and race are one of the main themes in our history. Racism is our country's original sin. It has always been there, poisoning us. Thomas Jefferson, in his Notes on the State of Virginia wrote, speaking about slavery, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever". This from a man who was both a slave owner and a brilliant disciple of democracy, illustrating well in one person America's internal paradox.

There are many who think that racism is on the rise today. I suspect that it has actually slowly decreased since the 1960s (until perhaps the past couple years) – but that our racism is now being increasingly caught on our new smartphones, and thrust in our face, so

we can't turn away as easily as we used to. We now see the ugly pictures of what has always been there.

“Fear no one.” The courage to face down such violence in order to protest this injustice is encouraging and inspiring. This fearlessness has been necessary for those who throughout American history have followed Jesus' call to “not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” They have proclaimed by their stand God's message that all persons are created in His image and likeness. That truth, taught by our faith, has all too often been forgotten, ignored, or denied by Christians, including Catholics. We have usually allowed ourselves to follow the American cultural norm rather than challenge it when it comes to race. This is a failure us we must admit to.

But along with this good news there are also aspects that trouble me in our current situation. If I spend more time on this than on what inspires me, it's only because this point will be less obvious or less acceptable to some.

The weekend after George Floyd's killing, I read out at mass Archbishop Etienne's letter on racism. He didn't ask priests to do that, but I wanted to join myself to his convictions, that "As Catholics . . . We cannot stand by and not respond to incidents of racism and inhuman treatment of our black brothers and sisters, or anyone else."

But the protests also take place in a larger social conflict -- some have called it a culture war. And that complicates things. For instance, Black Lives Matter is a simple statement of truth that I support. But BLM is also a political movement with an agenda and goals, not all directly related to race, reflecting its participation in this larger cultural conflict. Some of these goals are opposed to the Catholic Church's teachings. For example, Black Lives Matter's statement of beliefs affirms they seek "to dismantle cisgender privilege . . . disrupt the western prescribed nuclear family structure . . . foster a queer-affirming network . . . with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking." These positions on gender and family

adopted by BLM, keep me from supporting the Black Lives Matter as a political movement, as much as I agree with its racial justice goals.

Americans are deeply divided today. And racism is one divisive issue in this conflict, but there are others such as gender, sex, abortion, etc.

My point: as much as I'm inspired by desires to end racism, I'm also troubled by how that battle is being waged culturally. America was founded as an experiment in classic 18<sup>th</sup> century Liberalism (the kind of Liberalism best summed up in the Bill of Rights). I'm afraid that vision is being undermined today, less by frontal legal assault, than by cultural bullying. We need more tolerance among our elites for a greater array of opinions and plain error. And being able to freely debate these issues without being cancelled is not only legitimate but necessary for America to function as a healthy Republic.

I say that because the boundaries of socially permitted ideas are shrinking. The cultural policing of our speech, and even our beliefs, undermines that original American principle of freedom of speech. In

some powerful circles the cry against racism has gone from, “Fight racism!” (To which I say - Amen!) to “Fight racism the way we tell you to – or be punished!” (My hackles go up).

“Fear no one.” While I’m sure I and all of us have lots to learn about racism, I also believe that a dangerous dynamic is growing where people in academia, health care, technology, journalism, the arts and other fields, are afraid to discuss their beliefs (and not just about racism) lest they be punished by people with the power to ruin them professionally – and in this age of the internet that is easy to do. People should not be socially or economically destroyed for not using the right phrases or for not publicly expressing the acceptable positions.

Colin Kaepernick should not have lost his job for taking a knee. It was an example of good-old defiant individual freedom. After all, in America one thing the flag stands for is not having to stand for the flag. But neither should one lose one’s job for not (figuratively speaking) taking a knee. Four years ago, it took a lot of courage to protest this

way. Today it's becoming an expectation. I know many do it wholeheartedly and for sincere reasons, but for me in today's environment, as much as I support many of the ideas about fighting racism, to take a knee would today feel more like a betrayal – a forced act of submission to a broader ideology that opposes my deepest beliefs.

That ideology -- call it Critical Race Theory, or "Wokeness," or something else (it's rather amorphous) -- has some good points. The fight against racism is the best. But it also has dangerous tendencies in its basic assumptions that don't bode well for the future of our freedoms – especially freedom of speech regarding those other moral issues I mentioned earlier that I feel called to proclaim as a Catholic.

Here we come back to the question of who Thomas Jefferson was, and what America is all about. If the American project has really been about racism all along, then America needs to start over from new first principles and perhaps it makes sense that, because we're so corrupted, we must be coerced into adopting the right thoughts about

race and all the other issues. And some believe that about America. A statue of Jefferson was toppled and tagged by demonstrators last Sunday in Portland, a statue of George Washington just two days ago.

But if the first principle of America is not racism, but the liberty of the individual (as poorly as that has been lived out in America), then we're in trouble. This individualism has had healthy and destructive expressions throughout American history. The slaveowners loved their own freedom – but at what a cost! But, while Jefferson was a racist, most Americans have historically held that that fact doesn't erase his even greater virtues in fostering a freedom for all of us he failed to live out well himself. And if that's true, then what is developing in our country threatens that fundamental freedom and our very identity as America. It comes down to a question of what America needs – reform, or a new revolution?

Why preach a homily on this at mass? Because this great question of what America is, and needs, will also shape our ability to live as

Catholics. The Catholic Church has always been disdained by the American cultural elites. We've been outsiders – not as much as blacks, native Americans, or Jews, but outsiders, nonetheless. But even so the America created by the Founding Fathers has allowed us Catholics the freedom (usually) to speak and believe as our conscience dictates.

But if that Enlightenment-rooted American Republic, whose soul is freedom of religion, conscience, and speech (including that speech we fiercely oppose), if it morphs into something contrary to what the Founders designed, then we Catholics are going to be among the first to suffer for the change because the revolutionaries will have no regard for the Catholic church. We will personally need to live out Jesus' words, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." Under that regime we Catholics will still be called by Jesus to speak out and witness to our faith without fear, but we'll have to do it in the face of growing hostility and intimidation.