



There Is No Time Like Now! – A Reflection on Racism by Okey Anyanwu

Working in a faith community as an employee or a volunteer bequeaths a satisfaction of a different kind. This has been so true in my personal experience at St. Vincent de Paul Catholic Church. I say that with confidence because, as a “black” man working in a predominantly “white” parish, the events of this past week could have forced me to recoil into my shell for the fear of my inner questions. However, I have chosen to share my reflection based on the encouraging and inspirational experiences I have had in this great faith community for almost 13 years.

One of my most memorable experiences took place while I was presiding over a Wake Service for a 90-year-old deceased parishioner in one of the funeral Chapels in the Cities a few years ago. Let me refer to the deceased as “Jim” in order to avoid giving away his identity. As I was sharing a reflection from the readings, I jokingly said: “I wonder whether it ever crossed Jim’s mind that a black guy all the way from Africa will be presiding at his Wake Service”. Before I could finish that statement a huge laughter and applause resounded in that Chapel, which was fully packed with Jim’s relatives and friends. I was caught off-guard by that hilarious reaction because I knew nothing about Jim’s social struggles until his son humorously shared a story during his eulogy. The most touching part of that story was when his son recounted that his Dad’s favorite nurse in the hospital was an African American. According to him, Jim was so touched by this nurse’s loving care to the extent that a day before he died, he held unto this nurse’s hand and tearfully thanked her for helping him get over decades of deep-seated unchristian racial impressions. Jim’s parting words with this African American nurse were: “you are one person I needed to meet before the Lord calls me home”.

My dear people of God, Jim came to terms with the fact that how we relate to people who are different from us matters in our spiritual life. In accordance with the scriptures and Church’s moral teaching, our own Archbishop Harry Flynn of blessed memory in his Pastoral Letter on Racism titled “In God’s Image” clearly observed that “**Racism is a serious moral evil. It is a sin**”. That should be our focus as people of faith, not the regrettable looting and vandalism that took place during the protests. Those were mere momentary distractions and therefore do not qualify as an excuse for us to tune off.

We cannot tune off now that the hope of a better tomorrow has become so evident on the streets all over the world where blacks and whites, young and elderly, Christians and non-Christians came out to say, “enough is enough!”. I am inclined to think that the sanctuary for preaching the gospel of racial harmony has just received a face-lift in our hearts, on our streets, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces and even in our immediate families.

I can imagine an America and indeed a world, where being **different** may no longer connote deficiency and being **indifferent** to this reality may no longer be an option, because **making a difference** is becoming a unifying form of spirituality. The stage seems to be well set, because for several weeks, all the big cities in the world looked like ghost towns due to a global lockdown necessitated by COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, while governments of nations and religious leaders were strategizing to reopen in phases, our cities got flooded with people protesting racial injustice. What an involuntary and thought-provoking way to reopen for business!

It does feel like the joy of reopening our churches was quickly met by an urgent call for the Universal Church to leave the building and stand up for justice. **As a person of faith, what did you see? What are you hearing? ... and how do you feel?** There seem to be a deeper narrative than the fact that George Floyd died under the weight of injustice personified by Ex-officer Derek Chauvin while the 17-year-old, Darnella Frazier filmed and shared the video that ended the global lockdown as we knew it.

This deeper narrative hinges on the concept of **'breathing'**, which we don't think about very often. The scary statistics of the impact of coronavirus pandemic, which triggered a scramble for ventilators around the world reaffirmed how essential **'breathing'** is to life. Last week, in our beautiful City of Minneapolis, George Floyd screamed **"I can't breathe"** into the ears of a world plagued by a more dangerous pandemic of racial injustice and inequality. Just a few days after George quit breathing, the universal Church celebrated Pentecost, when **Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit"**. John 20:22

It would have been easier to end this reflection here by connecting the untold fear, anxiety and chaos in our society today to the emotions that ran through the hearts and minds of the disciples before the birth of the Church at Pentecost. However, it is striking to historically recall that **who we are as a Church has always and everywhere been forged in the crucible of turmoil and injustice**. So, while we feel sickened by the news of COVID-19 and the unrest following George Floyd's tragic death, we need to realize that the "Life and dignity of the human person" (the first principle of Catholic Social teaching) is at stake here. The truth remains that every race has a fair share of the same stereotypes that feed our fears and suspicions of the "other". Above all, we all share equal dignity as images and likenesses of God.

It's therefore expected that some of us may be asking the same question the Jews asked Peter after Pentecost: **"What do we do now?" or better still, what do I do now? Does racial difference mean deficiency to me? Am I indifferent to the sin of racism because I neither feel like a victim nor a perpetrator? Is there any opportunity for me to make a difference by being in solidarity with people of other races locally or internationally?**

- Can we as a parish community amplify our already established relationship with Zanewood Community School, which is predominantly populated by less privileged African American, Hispanic and Asian children?
- Can we become more intentional about our international outreach through BIZAA, which is focused on moving African children from streets into classrooms?
- Administratively, can we close our offices on every Martin Luther King Jr. public holiday as a concrete way of witnessing to the gospel of racial harmony?
- Can we start praying for victims and perpetrators of racism during "Prayers of the Faithful" at Mass when appropriate?

Sisters and brothers, while the scientists are busy researching to find a cure and develop a vaccine for COVID-19, we have the moral obligation as people of faith to be the "salt of the earth" by becoming living ventilators in a world that is suffocating from racial injustice and inequality. There is no time like now.

May the Peace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the sweet fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us both now and forever. Amen!