



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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June 24, 2020

Dear Senator:

Across our country, indeed across the entire world, people are examining yet once more the evil of racism, both historic and present, and its devastating effects on individuals and society. In the wake of the terrible and unjust killing of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and so many more, we the undersigned committee chairmen of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, write to you as you consider proposals around policing and criminal justice. Law enforcement officers perform a great and needed service; they serve to promote justice and the common good in society. But it is clear that there have been too many failures in serving everyone, with tragic consequences. There must be better practices for formation and accountability for police, certainly in the use of lethal force, but also in patterns of discrimination and prejudice, so that real accountability can happen before more lives are lost.

The U.S. bishops have pointed out numerous times that racism remains a problem in the criminal justice system. In 2000 we wrote that the evidence has long been clear that people of color are “often treated more harshly than other citizens in their encounters with the criminal justice system” such that “the racism and discrimination that continue to haunt our nation are reflected in similar ways in the criminal justice system.”¹ In 2018, in our pastoral letter against racism entitled *Open Wide Our Hearts*, we bishops noted that, in light of “the killing of unarmed African Americans by law enforcement officials. . . we must admit the plain truth that for many of our fellow citizens, who have done nothing wrong, interactions with the police are often fraught with fear and even danger.”² On June 3, Pope Francis addressed the death of George Floyd, saying, “we cannot tolerate . . . racism and exclusion . . . and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.”³

We must make progress in the use of force by the police and other law enforcement officers. Pope Francis, speaking to a group of law enforcement officers in 2017, offered his thoughts that the “use of force” must “never degenerate[] into violence,” which “demands great wisdom and self-control.”⁴ This is especially important when such officers are often “regarded with mistrust or almost as an enemy, rather than as guardian of the common good.” The pope also urged “a style of mercy” in policing, which “is not synonymous with weakness, nor does it require the renunciation of the use of force,” but does mean, among other things, “making the effort to understand the needs and the motivations of the people” whom police encounter, and to apply

¹ *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice* (2000). <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm>

² *Open Wide Our Hearts: the enduring call to love, a pastoral letter against racism* (2018), at 5. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/racism/upload/open-wide-our-hearts.pdf>

³ Pope Francis, General Audience (June 3, 2020). <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/06/03/200603a.html>

⁴ Pope Francis, Address to Managers and Staff of the Street and Railway Police Central Department (Nov. 20, 2017). http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/november/documents/papa-francesco_20171120_polizia-stradale-ferroviaria.html

mercy “in the countless situations of weakness and pain that [police] face every day.” The pope concluded by noting that the role of police is “at the heart of society,” and “by its high value” is “a mission, to be performed with honour and deep sense of duty, serving . . . the common good.”

Police operating under high standards perform a valuable service for the promotion of the common good in society. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “a just society needs order and a respect for the rule of law to achieve a peaceful and tranquil coexistence in society.”⁵ Pope St. John Paul II, in addressing a group of Catholic police officers, noted that police work is a way of “witnessing to the authenticity of your belief in the Paschal Mystery” when such work is marked by “high moral standards,” “discipline,” “self-sacrifice and genuine concern for the common good.”⁶ This essential work “needs the support of a profound sense of the unique dignity of every human being. The special value of each person can only be fully understood where each one is accepted as an image of God himself and a brother or sister of Christ.”⁷

We stand in the long tradition—from St. Augustine, to St. Thomas Aquinas, to Dr. Martin Luther King—that claims that the purpose of law and law enforcement is the promotion of justice.⁸ Public authority comes from justice, not from power. When public authority acts with justice, it creates an obligation for people to support that authority because God is the source of all justice, such that defying just authority “resists what God has appointed” (*Rom* 13:2). By contrast, “whenever public authority . . . fails to seek the common good, it abandons its proper purpose and so delegitimizes itself.”⁹

Pope St. Paul VI coined the phrase, “If you want peace, work for justice.”¹⁰ This is the only solution to the challenges of this moment. When protesters shout, “No justice, no peace,” perhaps without realizing it, they are paraphrasing an axiom of the Church. A police force that is accountable to its highest standards – discipline, self-control, mercy, and the recognition that every person is made in the image of God – can promote justice and thus bring about peace. However, “[w]hen a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.”¹¹

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in the 81st General Assembly of Interpol (Nov. 9, 2012).

http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20121109_interpol.html

⁶ Pope St. John Paul II, Address to the Representatives of the Catholic Police Officers of England and Wales (April 12, 1985). http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1985/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19850412_ufficiali-polizia.html

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *See, e.g.*, Dr. Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” (April 16, 1963) (“I would agree with St. Augustine that ‘an unjust law is no law at all.’ . . . An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law”).

⁹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2005), no. 398.

¹⁰ Pope St. Paul VI, Message for the Celebration of the Day of Peace (Jan. 1, 1972).

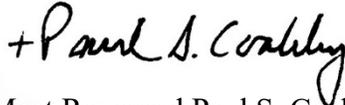
http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_p-vi_mes_19711208_v-world-day-for-peace.html

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), no. 59.

Several policy proposals currently before you appear to take steps in the right direction. These include collection of data on use-of-force, training towards de-escalation, work to end racial profiling, doing away with chokeholds, using body cameras, greater accountability and means of redress regarding those who exercise public authority, and a commission to study the issue further and make additional recommendations. It is clear that long term commitment is needed to prevent further tragedies, especially greater accountability in bad uses of force as well as greater emphasis on promoting the common good of all.

The Lord himself told us, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (*Mt. 5:9*). Let us pray that we may be peacemakers by working for justice on this issue and the many others that mark racial injustice in our criminal justice system and in our country.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley
Archbishop of Oklahoma City
Chairman, Committee on Domestic
Justice and Human Development



Most Reverend Mario E. Dorsonville
Auxiliary Bishop of Washington
Chairman, Committee on Migration



Most Reverend Shelton J. Fabre
Bishop of Houma-Thibodaux
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