

The time is right for a new national effort to deal with the racism that continues to plague our society. This window of opportunity has been created by the well-publicized deaths of black males at the hands of white police officers and the public protests in cities all over the country after grand juries failed to indict the officers involved. The tragic deaths of teenager Michael Brown on a street in Ferguson, Missouri, 43-year-old father of six Eric Garner on a sidewalk in Staten Island, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice in a Cleveland playground not only inflicted untold grief on their families and friends, but also highlighted deep tensions between law enforcement and many black communities across the land. These incidents generated powerful symbols which have energized protesters. Eleven times the dying Eric Garner, pinned face down to the ground, repeated "I can't breathe" which became a mantra chanted by protesters and worn by famous athletes, including Kobe Bryant and LeBron James.

As political and religious leaders have pointed out, these highly publicized deaths are symptomatic of deep, enduring tensions in our society. Commentators on the situation have presented a great deal of statistical evidence highlighting the problems: the United States is 5% of the world's population but 22% of the world's prison population; blacks, who are 12% of the total U.S. population, make up 40% of the U.S. prison population; young black males are 21 times more likely to be killed by police officers than their white counterparts; 62% of African Americans believe the police officer was at fault in shooting Michael Brown, while only 22% of whites hold that view; at the end of 2013, almost 3% of black males were imprisoned compared to .5% of whites; African Americans comprise 14% of regular drug users but are 37% of those arrested for drug offenses; in the Federal system, black offenders receive 10% longer sentences than whites for the same crimes; 59% of whites have at least quite a bit of confidence in police compared to 37% of blacks; 59% of whites rate the ethics of police officers as high or better compared to 45% of blacks; about 25% of young black men claim they were treated unfairly by police in the past 30 days; 40% of blacks say they have very little or no confidence in the criminal justice system compared to 30% of whites. These generally accepted statistical studies not only help us understand something of the visceral reaction of African Americans to the killing of black males by police officers but also suggest the need to look for practical solutions to the problem.

On December 18, 2014, President Obama created a Task Force on 21st Century Policing, which includes law enforcement representatives, community leaders, academics, and youth leaders, to examine ways to foster more trustful relationships between local police and the communities they protect. The task force, which intends to convene listening sessions and accept comments from the public, has 90 days to produce a report with concrete suggestions for improving the situation.

In searching for practical solutions, the Task Force might consider what some call the "Cincinnati Model." In 2001, a Cincinnati police officer shot and killed a 19 year old black male fleeing arrest for non-violent misdemeanors, leading to six days of protest and looting that ended when the mayor declared a state of emergency and brought in the state highway patrol to impose an 8 PM to 6 AM curfew throughout the city. As a response, various segments of the Cincinnati community, including city officials, black leaders and the police union, came together and hammered out the Cincinnati Collaborative Agreement, which encouraged community-oriented policing and established the Citizens Complaint Authority, an independent body, to investigate claims that police used excessive force. Although not perfect, and sometimes criticized as over-hyped, the Cincinnati Model has definitely improved relationships between police and the black community. A 2010 study, for instance, showed no evidence of racial differences between the stops police made of black and white drivers, a big improvement over 2001 when blacks were twice as likely to be stopped for traffic violations as whites. The Cincinnati police force is now 30% black in a city that is 44% African American, a big improvement over 1984 when it was 10% black. Some formerly crime-ridden neighborhoods have flourished, in part, because of community-oriented policing, although the tactic has not worked so well in other low-income neighborhoods. At any rate, the Cincinnati experience, already replicated in other cities, suggests that it is possible to improve relationships between the police and African Americans.

Responding to the current socially charged situation, hundreds of Catholic theologians, myself included, have signed a Statement on Racial Injustice, which calls for "a serious examination of both policing and racial injustice in the U.S." The statement includes a pledge "to examine within ourselves our complicity in the sin of racism and how it sustains false images of White superiority in relationship to Black inferiority." This examination should take seriously the teaching of the American bishops that "Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father."

Such a self-examination, which is a healthy spiritual exercise for all Christians, is a difficult task, requiring prayer and honest reflection. It helps to recall how subtle racist attitudes can be. Nelson Mandela, a true champion of black equality, tells the story of boarding a plane in another country as a young man and becoming worried about the safety of the flight when he realized that the pilot was black. If Nelson Mandela knew an unconscious racial bias, it is unlikely that white Americans are free of all bias.

In an August 27, 2014 New York Times article, columnist Nicholas Kristof wrote that young black men in America suffer from widespread racial stereotyping by both whites and African Americans. He went on to claim that the real problem is not so much overt racists, but the large number of enlightened people who intellectually support racial equality, but "harbor unconscious attitudes that result in discriminatory policies and behavior." He then cited studies to support his thesis: doctors treating broken legs gave blacks significantly less pain medication than whites; resumes for jobs submitted with black-sounding names get half the positive responses of resumes with white-sounding names. Kristof himself took a test based on a video game experiment which showed that he shot armed black men more quickly than armed white men. This whole line of thought suggests that our self-examination on racial bias must look not only for overt prejudice, but also for subtle, unconscious forms of racist stereotyping. In my own examination, I recall being frightened when I found myself alone in a dark New York subway with a young black man - a fear which dissipated quickly when he spotted me and took off running. There is no doubt our culture perpetuates the stereotype of young black males as dangerous.

The statement signed by Catholic theologians has a section that begins: "We support our police, whose work is indeed dangerous at times," which now has added importance with the recent killing of two Brooklyn police officers, Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos by a mentally ill individual. The statement goes on to support "the proven, effective" community policing approach, which is "more consonant with our Catholic convictions that we are all each other's keepers and should work together for the common good of our communities." Community policing will be more effective with better recruiting, training and education of police as well as greater accountability and transparency, such as body cameras for those sworn "to serve and protect" their communities.

Responding to widespread dissatisfaction with recent grand jury decisions, the theologians call for "publicly accountable review boards staffed with civilian attorneys and/or the appointment of independent special prosecutor's offices to investigate claims of police misconduct."

In dealing with "our nation's pervasive yet too often denied systemic racial divisions," the statement calls for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine race in America. We can presume such a commission would hold public hearings where blacks and whites could tell their stories of racial tensions without fear of prosecution or reprisal, so that we can understand ourselves better and find practical solutions to our common problems.

The Statement on Racial Justice concludes with a prayer that constructive actions will lead to a time when "love and truth will meet; justice and peace will kiss" (Psalm 85:10).

Many of us have discovered that the best way to get to know those who are other is through personal encounter. White and black Americans can overcome bias and establish trust by interacting with one another. Back in 1983, I hosted a small dinner party for the black author James Baldwin, who was then a writer in residence at Bowling Green State University. During the meal, Jimmy, as his friends called him, spoke passionately about the racism he encountered in the United States. At one point, he said "We blacks know you whites because we have to in order to survive, but you don't know us because you don't have to." The point that has stuck with me is the great importance of trying to understand our African-American brothers and sisters, while realizing our limitations in doing so. As white Americans, we don't really know what it is like to be racially profiled: followed in a department store, stopped when driving, and searched on the street. On the other hand, even a modest effort to understand can lead to greater trust.

On a few occasions, a black pastor friend of mine, Franklin Freeman, invited me to preach at his black church on the east side of Toledo. Those were Spirit-filled events for me. The congregation always gave me a warm welcome and drew me into their enthusiastic worship. I was never sure when the actual service began, but it didn't matter because the socializing and the worship, both accompanied by exuberant music, were so integrally connected. Spontaneously, the congregation set the tone and rhythm of my longer than usual sermon. Their "Amen's" encouraged me and dictated the pauses. After the service, no one seemed in a hurry to leave and the resulting conversations were stimulating.

Those experiences left me with a better appreciation of black spirituality, which survived slavery and ongoing discrimination through a lively faith in a God who liberates the oppressed and a Jesus who suffered and died to save us. According to a 2008 Pew Study, African Americans are more religious than the U.S. population as a whole. Fully 87% belong to a religious group, while 79% say religion is very important in their lives. Slightly over half report attending a religious service at least once a week and three-fourths say they pray daily. About 60% of Black Americans say that their churches should speak out on social and political matters. We should note that there is a significant generational difference in the African-American community, with 19% of those under age 30 unaffiliated with a church compared to just 7% of those over 65.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the black churches remain a valuable resource in promoting dialogue on racism in our country. We can envision predominantly white congregations collaborating with black churches to set up a series of small group discussions designed to help blacks and whites to get to know one another better. Such face-to-face encounters have great potential to promote mutual trust, while providing a setting where friendships can develop. In some cities, initial efforts along this line are in place. Catholic parishes are more likely to participate if the local bishop backs the effort, and if overworked pastors can present to their people a prepackaged program which brings blacks and whites together in church settings with some type of guidance for the discussion. As white American Christians, we need to listen to our black brothers and sisters in an effort to understand their experience with discrimination, including their problems with police and law enforcement. There was, no doubt, a time when whites felt no need to know blacks, as James Baldwin put it, but the recent racial tensions remind us that we have an obligation to know those who are other, so that we can work together to form a more just society where all can flourish.