

Local News

Black Catholics urge prayer, change after Floyd killing and riots



The Carter family (Donovan, Donald, Valerie and Sabrina) of St. Athanasius Parish in Philadelphia have experienced racism firsthand over several generations, yet remain hopeful that "God can change people's hearts." (Photo courtesy of Donovan Carter)

By Gina Christian • Posted June 1, 2020

The killing of George Floyd and the protests it has sparked represent a defining moment for the Catholic Church, according to Black Catholics throughout the Philadelphia Archdiocese.

"I'm looking to my community to accompany us," said Sabrina Carter, a 24-year-old nonprofit marketing professional and member of St. Athanasius Parish in Philadelphia's West Oak Lane section. "I'm leaning on fellow Catholics, all the way up to the pope, because I know what they can do; I've seen their potential to effect change."

Father Stephen Thorne, pastor of St. Martin de Porres Parish in North Philadelphia, said that Floyd's death and the outrage it has unleashed "(bring) home the issue that we have to see each other as fellow human beings, with the dignity of God's children."

"The (U.S.) bishops are very clear about being informed, speaking out and being intentional in our encounters with one another," said Father Thorne.

Floyd died May 25 while under Minneapolis police restraint, just days after Georgia resident Ahmaud Arbery was fatally shot by a former police officer and his son. On March 13, Kentucky EMT worker Breonna Taylor was killed in her home by police serving a search warrant for drugs; none were found in her apartment.



Father Stephen Thorne, pastor of St. Martin de Porres Parish in Philadelphia (seen here in this 2017 file photo), has called for “a new Pentecost” in a country “marred by racism,” as evidenced by the May 25 police killing of Minneapolis resident George Floyd. (Photo by Sarah Webb)

A number of those interviewed by CatholicPhilly said that the Floyd, Arbery and Taylor deaths — along with the police-related killings of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014 — underscore the systemic racism decried by the U.S. bishops in a [2018 pastoral letter](#).

“If it seems like only one incident started this, then you’re missing a lot regarding what the whole African-American community has been dealing with,” said Carter.

And although political activism has a role in combating inequality, “we need a spiritual facelift in this country,” said Father Thorne. “We have been marred by racism. We need a new Pentecost, because this is not who we are.”

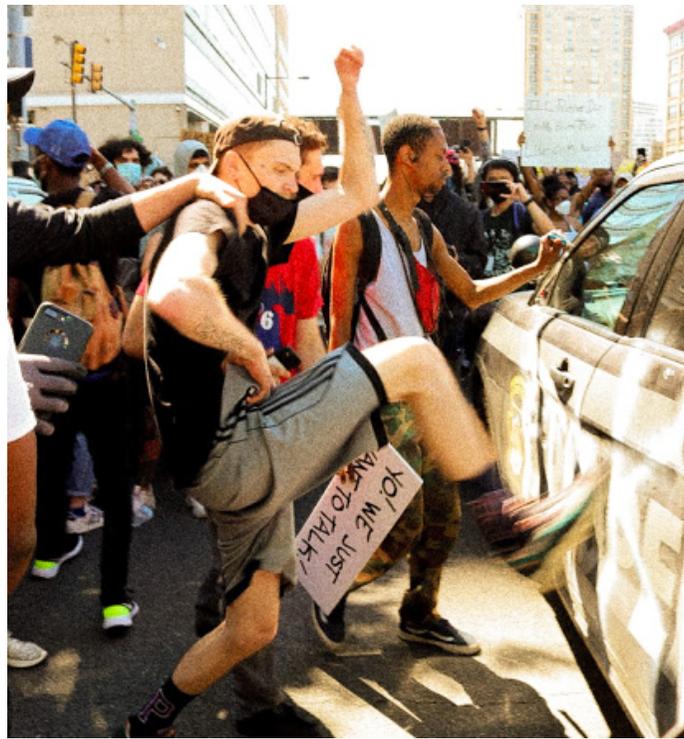
Racism hits home

Carter’s brother Donovan, a sophomore at Community College of Philadelphia, said that most participants at the May 30 Center City protests, including him, sought “to express how they felt in a reverent and peaceful manner.”

“The media has been painting a picture that all the protests were filled with rage-induced people who only wanted to inflict that same violence on police officers in the name of George Floyd,” he said.

While filming the demonstration, Carter said he noticed that after about an hour “more people were beginning to join (who) looked ... suspicious,” carrying “bats and spray cans.” Shortly afterward, he saw “the slime of chaos unfold,” he said.

With “some of the most violent incidents” happening in front of him, he and his friends left the area, while continuing to monitor the situation through social media posts.



Violence erupted at an initially peaceful May 30 Philadelphia demonstration against the killing of George Floyd while under Minneapolis police restraint. (Photo by Donovan Carter)

Like his sister and their parents, Donald and Valerie, Carter emphasized the need for an honest evaluation of racial tensions in the light of Christian faith.

“I felt it was important to be (at the protests), and as a black male to express how I felt,” he said, adding that even amid its tragic consequences, the gathering showed “how many people are part of this movement and really do care.”

For the Carter family, all of whom are St. Athanasius parishioners, and for others in the archdiocese, racism has hit home.

As a 12-year-old, Donovan Carter was frisked by police while walking down the street from his home to purchase a snack. He said the experience taught him that such encounters easily could “become one of your last seconds on earth.”

His father Donald said the entire family was once “targeted by a police officer” and was pulled over while driving to a store.

His children “got to see how we handled it,” said the elder Carter, an operational manager for a local bank and a member of the Knights of St. Peter Claver, the country’s largest African-American lay Catholic organization.

Noting that he had been frisked at an even younger age than his son and had experienced racism throughout his 30-year career, Donald Carter said it was “frustrating” that “things haven’t changed” since his own childhood.

“You always hope your children wouldn’t have to experience the same ugliness and hate that you did,” he said.

His wife Valerie said that “as the mother of an African American male, it is stressful as (her son) leaves the house.”

“Over the years, we have seen things happen,” she said. “I want to think that it’s not going to be bad as the last riot or unrest, but each time it seems worse.”



John Wilson, a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Doylestown, said that Scripture study, prayer, honesty and a willingness to listen to others are vital in eradicating racism. (Photo courtesy of John Wilson)

John Wilson, a parishioner of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish in Doylestown, said he'd been forced to have a "tragic but necessary conversation" with his own son, instructing him to "give police nothing to be concerned about" should he ever be detained by law enforcement.

At the same time, like all of those with whom CatholicPhilly spoke, Wilson – who counts several police officers as friends – underlined that law enforcement personnel should not be targeted for violence, and that their efforts to preserve order and safety deserve support.

"I'm well aware of how difficult it must be to be a police officer," said Wilson, noting that he and his friends "don't shy away from talking about this (issue)."

A racial examen and 'words into action'

Wilson, who leads a men's Bible study group, said that such honesty and the willingness to listen to others are key to dismantling racism and healing its wounds, as is the active participation of the entire church.

"You can't be a passenger in this," said Wilson. "Christianity is not a spectator event, and the work needs to be done by us."

Father Thorne agreed, noting that "no one is exempt from this conversation," which should begin with a deeper understanding of the roots of racism.

"This issue is about eternal life; this is about the God I serve," he said.

Pointing out that Floyd had died just before Pentecost while gasping "I can't breathe," Father Thorne said that "we need the Holy Spirit to breathe on us again" to remind us that "we all breathe the same air."

Individually and collectively, Catholics need to undertake a kind of "racial examen" to identify both active prejudice and its denial, said several of those interviewed by CatholicPhilly.



Msgr. Federico Britto, pastor of St. Cyprian and St. Ignatius parishes in Philadelphia, preached the homily at a Jan. 20 archdiocesan prayer service in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Responding to the George Floyd killing, Msgr. Britto said “the word of God” should make faithful uncomfortable with racial inequalities. (Photo by Sarah Webb).

As a white pastor of a largely African American parish, Father Chris Walsh of St. Raymond of Penafort in Philadelphia said he believes “a large number of white people really do not believe (racism) exists.”

On Monday, June 1 at 7 p.m., Father Walsh will hold an online forum through his [Facebook page](#) to discuss the Floyd case and the issue of racism.

Msgr. Federico Britto, pastor of St. Cyprian Parish and administrator of St. Ignatius of Loyola in West Philadelphia, said that “racism is not just black and white,” but has manifested itself throughout U.S. history among various immigrant groups.

He said that Catholics “have to keep putting (their) feet to the ground and (their) words into action.”

“Even though we say the words and write pastoral letters, we have to make sure our organizations and our church are more diverse,” he said. “The bottom line is that people are asking for justice, and to be heard.”

Wilson said that process actually begins with listening to one’s own heart to sift through attitudes that deny “a common brotherhood” and ultimately “a common fatherhood,” as St. John Paul II reminded the faithful in a 2001 Angelus address.

Msgr. Britto said that “if we take the word of God seriously, we should be uncomfortable” with current racial inequalities.

Yet while all of those interviewed agreed that both church and society have, as Msgr. Britto said, “a long way to go” in countering racism, there is great reason for hope.

“The good news from my perspective is what I witness in my students,” said Kevin Williams, a theology teacher at Father Judge High School and member of St. Raymond Parish. “To their credit, they are far beyond the ignorance of racism and bigotry, and they have a connectedness with one another.”

Sabrina Carter said that despite the persistence of racism in the U.S., she believes that “people can change.”

“God works in mysterious ways,” she said. “He changes people’s hearts.”

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