



Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam

January 18, 2021
UEA 2021/01

Dear Brothers and Friends in the Lord,

Christ's Peace!

Today the nation pauses to remember one of its prophetic leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I want to take this opportunity to reflect on the reality of systemic racism and how we, as Jesuits and colleagues in mission on the East Coast, are called to respond.

Last summer, at his recommendation and with my wholehearted approval, Fr. Ken Boller, S.J. gathered a group of Jesuits to present me with plans to address racism. I am grateful to the members of the steering committee: Frs. Greg Chisholm, S.J., Rudy Casals, S.J., Sean Toole, S.J., John Wronski, S.J., Mr. Steve Nicholson, S.J. and Mr. Christian Verghese, S.J. They were joined by Mr. Nick Napolitano, Provincial Assistant for Social Ministries, who will spearhead our efforts. Before I spell out my proposals for moving forward, I invite us to take stock of our current situation and why this effort is so important.

The events of January 6, which have put our democracy in peril, have laid bare the ugliness of deep-seated racism and white supremacy in our nation. This comes after months of revelations of police brutality against African-Americans and the seeming indifference of many in positions of power. We know that it is people of color who are disproportionately infected and killed by the covid-19 virus. We also know that people of color are most directly affected by the economic crisis of these past months. Underpinning these health and economic challenges are the structures of systemic racism that led to calls for justice and equity last year. Finally, we must come to terms with the shameful legacy of slaveholding in our Province. We must sit in the discomfort of this hard truth, seek forgiveness and commit ourselves anew to the ministry of justice and reconciliation. Sadly, racial injustice is not a thing of the past. Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli tutti* (#20) that “a readiness to discard others finds expression in vicious attitudes that we thought long past, such as racism, which retreats underground only to keep reemerging. Instances of racism continue to shame us, for they show that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think.” Pope Francis has given us the mandate to walk with the excluded, those whose dignity has been violated. We must heed that call.

As I look to the coming Ignatian Year, our Province Congregation and apostolic planning for the Universal Apostolic Preferences, I envision three initiatives to encourage racial justice and equity work across our Province:

- Individual prayer and communal spiritual conversation. I call each of us to an individual examination of conscience about these issues. We cannot seek contrition without naming our sins. In addition, I am asking superiors to consider ways communities can engage in frank conversation. Perhaps Lent would be a good time to begin these efforts. Resources will be made available on the Province website.
- Apostolic reflection. What does the past tell us about how a particular apostolate resisted and/or was informed by notions of racial justice? Can we identify programs, resources and people across the apostolate that are currently engaging in racial justice work, which may have bearing on our way of proceeding within the particular apostolate as a whole? Our lay colleagues in each Jesuit apostolate will be important participants in this reflection. Listening to persons of color, whether colleagues or brother Jesuits, employees or those served by our works--past or present, also should be a feature of this apostolic reflection.
- Jesuit Anti-Racism Sodality (JARS). In the Midwest Province, men in formation have created a grass-roots movement to offer advanced opportunities for prayer, reading, and conversation. I invite those who have a passion for these issues in our Province to come together to pray, reflect and act. JARS would be open to all, with a particular emphasis on young people, those we are to accompany in the creation of a hope-filled future.

I am asking Nick Napolitano to coordinate the steering committee in order to move ahead with these initiatives. You will be hearing from him with more details and you may contact him with any questions or concerns.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once told the students of Oberlin College, "the time is always right to do what's right." Brothers and colleagues in mission – the time is right. Let us move forward on the road to racial justice and reconciliation .

Yours in Christ,



Joseph M . O'Keefe, S.J.
Provincial