

All Lives Matter

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Twelve years ago, in the midst of the scandal of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests, a parishioner wrote me a letter of consolation. The parishioner was a policeman. He said that he understood how embarrassed and hurt I was by the sins committed by priests. He said that he felt the same way when police officers were involved in scandals and crimes. "In any profession," he said, "there are always some bad apples. We are still grateful for your service."

His letter was a real comfort. It meant a lot to me to know that despite the news, not everyone thought that all priests were pedophiles or child abusers.

It is time I returned his favor.

Lately it has been a tough time to be a police officer in the United States. The death of black men at the hands of some police has raised legitimate questions about the excessive use of force in poor and minority communities. The "Black Lives Matter" movement has rightly reminded us that every life matters: black, white, brown, yellow *and* blue.

Today every cell phone is a video camera. Video evidence has meant that everyone, police and civilians, are held to account for their behavior. People can now see for themselves examples of unjust or excessive force. In cases like the North Charleston, SC, shooting in the back of Walter Scott by former police officer Michael Slager, the use of deadly force was shocking and pretty clearly unnecessary.

But there is a lot you don't see in the videos that play on YouTube or on television. There is a lot of good policing that is never seen.

What you don't see on television are the hundreds of thousands of interactions between police and citizens that are peaceful and professional. You don't see the hundreds of lives saved by the presence of a police officer who calms a domestic violence situation or disarms a mentally ill person. You don't see all the homeless people who are taken to shelters or hospitals. You don't see the lost children reunited with their parents. You don't see the depressed people talked out of a suicide or the drunks whose lives are saved when they are stopped while driving under the influence of alcohol. Yes sometimes police use too much force. But just as often teenagers are driven home to their parents, addicts who are saved from themselves, people are let off with a warning.

Citizens want an orderly society. We want robbers and rapists caught and murders stopped from killing. Ever since Robert Peel introduced his "bobbies" onto London streets in the 19th century, we have come to expect that society can be made safer by good policing.

The brutal killings of Officer Joseph Gliniewicz in Illinois and Deputy Sheriff Darren Goforth in Texas remind us just how much risky ordinary police duties can be. Police officers never know when they leave for work if they will return home at the end of their shift.

There have been 84 deaths of law enforcement officers in the first 8 months this year. This is about average. Last year there were 117 deaths. The most violent year for police deaths was 1930, when 301 police officers were killed. Since 2000 the average number of officers killed in the line of duty has been 156 per year. The worst year since WW II was 1974 when 280 officers were killed. The leading cause of death for police officers is car crashes.

It is true that police officers sometimes take lives. In 2014 police officers killed 630 people in the line of duty, an unusually high number. An average year seems to be closer to 300 per year. Statistics are hard to come by and rather unreliable because not every agency reports these deaths and not every report uses the same standards.

But the police officers I know are not casual about taking a life. They are serious about protecting life. Often police have only a split second to make a life or death decision. Every day they confront people who are intoxicated, agitated, violent or just deranged. Frequently people disobey their lawful orders. Sometimes officers must use force, including deadly force. Several of the veteran police officers in our parish tell me they have never fired their weapons.

Our parish, like many Catholic parishes, has a good many police officers. Catholics have a strong tradition of public service as police and other emergency responders. In our pews we have local, state, and federal, officers, including FBI, DEA, and Secret Service Agents. We have big city police, state troopers, and deputy sheriffs.

I know them in their off duty hours as parents, coaches, and volunteers. I see them as Eucharistic ministers and lectors. They participate in Eucharistic adoration, Knights of Columbus, and our men's club. They are joiners, the sort of community minded people that any parish wants.

Of course, as my police officer friend said about the priests, there are some bad apples. Police officers are drawn from our imperfect society, touched by class distinctions and racism.

But try to imagine a world without good policing. It would be chaos. That is the lawless world of a modern day Libya or Somalia. Try to imagine how any big event, like the visit of Pope Francis this month, or a World Series, or a Super Bowl, could take place without a significant police presence. How could we get through even a single big city rush hour?

Every time I hear noises outside the rectory at night, I am glad that the police are there to investigate. Every time I go to court for an abused woman, I am glad a police officer helped.

Twelve years ago, a policeman wrote me a kind note of encouragement when Catholic priests were feeling besieged. It is time I returned his favor.

On behalf of all the priests who see good police at work every day, I want to say thank you to our police officers for their service. We need you. We are grateful for you.