

## Police, race and the parish

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The day after the murder of three police officers in Baton Rouge, our parish sent a little delegation to the two police stations (county and state) in our town. The delegation carried giant cards (really display boards) each bearing approximately 300 signatures. The cards read, "St. John Vianney Catholic Church Thanks our Police for their Service to our Community," and people had also inscribed little greetings and blessings. We also brought a huge box of doughnuts.

One sheriff's deputy rightly pointed out that doughnuts was "cultural stereotyping" of the police. I agreed with him and said we would come back with carrots sticks and celery. He said, "No. That's ok. We'll keep the doughnuts."

I hope the cards and gifts to the police were much appreciated. It had been a tough couple of weeks for all police officers, nationwide.

As we took up the signatures on the Sunday morning, the shots of a lone gunman in Baton Rouge were taking place. Nearly two weeks before, five police officers had been assassinated in Dallas by another gunman.

For me the police killings and the killing of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile near Minneapolis occasioned two weeks of soul searching and preaching on the difficult topic of race and violence in our society.

My parish is conservative. It is nearly all white. Many people are NRA members. I'll bet you if we took a poll on Sunday morning, most people are gun owners and side with the police in these disputes. But not everyone.

The weekend after the murders in Dallas, I preached about the essential role that the police serve in our community. I talked about how they risk their lives for the sake of us all. I spoke of how we needed to respect and honor them for their contribution to our common good.

One lady in our parish, an African American, rightly took me to task for my homily. She said, "You didn't mention the men killed in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis. You didn't pray for them. They have families too. They had feelings too. I'm afraid for my husband when he leaves the house in the morning. I never know if something is going to happen."

I was cut to the quick. She was right.

But the last time I talked about police killings and race, when Eric Gardner had died of suffocation on Staten Island when he was arrested for selling loose cigarettes, I had been rather loudly criticized by a man who said I didn't appreciate the police enough.

Either way I jumped, I'm snake bit.

This is the problem. It is difficult to be even handed.

The morning of the Baton Rouge murder of the police officers, I preached on the issue again. I moved a music stand to the center of the sanctuary, telling the people I wanted to preach from the physical and philosophical center on this topic.

I recognized and honored the police for their service and the sacrifice. But I also said that we are foolish if we do not recognize the pervasive racism in our culture. When black men are killed in crimes, often no one is held accountable. Black men are arrested and incarcerated at a much higher rate than white men and receive harsher sentences for the same crimes. It is a simple fact.

I quoted Sen. Tim Scotts, the very conservative African American U.S. senator for South Carolina. In a speech on the Senate floor, he noted that he himself had been stopped seven times in one year. He had been stopped for trivial causes. Once he was even refused admittance to the U.S.

Capitol until he showed some ID, despite the fact that he had a lapel pin identifying him as a U.S. senator.

When he was refused admittance to the Capitol, he received a phone call later that day from a police supervisor, apologizing. He said it would have been more appreciated if only it hadn't been at least the third time he had received a similar call of apology from the police for failing to identify him correctly.

The whole question of race is fraught with conflict and tension. But it is a moral issue that Christian preachers cannot ignore.

I told our congregation that racism is a sin. It is a mortal sin. It kills our relationship with a God who is love and kills our relationships with each other.

Still, not everyone is ever happy. People always want to feel aggrieved. One lady said to me, "My father was no better than a slave." I said to her, "Was your father shackled, beaten, sold, or whipped because of the color of his skin?" "No," she said.

We need the police. They help bring order and peace to a large and diverse society. They come to our aide in moments of crisis. As President Obama said in Dallas, they are often called upon to do the job of parents, teachers, drug counselors, social workers and therapists.

On the other hand, we have to recognize the systemic and persistent racism of our society. Things are not equal. They are not always fair. Black men often are not treated fairly.

The church has to hear the pain of both sides and be a sign of peace.

Lately with all the violence in the world, I have been using the Second Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation nearly every day.

The preface says:

*For though the human race  
is divided by dissension and discord,  
yet we know that by testing us,  
you change our hearts  
to prepare them for reconciliation.  
Even more, by your Spirit you move human hearts  
that enemies may speak to each other again,  
adversaries may join hands,  
and peoples seek to meet together.  
By the working of your power  
it comes about, O Lord,  
that hatred is overcome by love,  
revenge gives way to forgiveness,  
and discord is changed to mutual respect.*

I hope that prayer can come true in my life time, at least on the topic of race.