

For Immediate Release

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Statement Racial Harmony Commission Diocese of Baton Rouge

Note to Editors: *The Racial Harmony Commission of the Diocese of Baton Rouge was appointed by then-Bishop Robert W. Muench in the aftermath of the July 5, 2016 killing of Alton Sterling by local police and the subsequent shooting deaths of three law enforcement officers -- Montrell Jackson, Brad Garafola and Matthew Gerald.*

The bi-racial commission, which consists of 12 members and includes clergy, religious and laity of the diocese, continues to meet at the direction of Bishop Michael G. Duca to explore ways to better understand the effects of racism on our society and to build community around the need for racial harmony.

The commission has issued the following statement in response to the death of George Floyd and to commemorate the fourth anniversaries of the deaths of Alton Sterling and law enforcement officers Montrell Jackson, Brad Garafola and Matthew Gerald. Bishop Duca has endorsed this statement.

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Over the last month, protesters and marches have become frequent occurrences in our country. The public, brutal killing of George Floyd by police has shaken our nation, and we mourn his death.

The deaths of Mr. Floyd and so many other African Americans and Hispanics -- Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Elijah McClain, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Botham Jean, Tamar Rice and Baton Rouge's Alton

Sterling on July 5, 2016 -- serve as constant reminders that in far too many cases the law is enforced differently depending upon the color of one's skin.

In the aftermath of Mr. Sterling's death, Baton Rouge bore witness to waves of painful emotions such as anger, horror, helplessness and grief. These feelings were amplified 12 days later by the murder of three local law enforcement officers -- Montrell Jackson, Brad Garafola and Matthew Gerald -- creating further anger, shock and division.

The tragic events of 2016 bear witness to the truth of the statement that violence breeds violence, and justice denied to anyone systematically will breed fear, contempt for the law, anger and division in our city, state and country. "If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand." (*Mark 3:25*)

Similar to Mr. Floyd, the taking of Mr. Sterling's life was senseless, and the manner of his death disturbed our hearts and souls. But it is not enough just to be disturbed. We need to face the truth: slavery is America's original sin and is a sin against humanity. The damage that this sin has inflicted, and the systemic racial injustice that it has spawned, have affected every aspect of American life over the last four centuries. We must truthfully acknowledge and address this stain on our heritage, or our community and our nation will remain broken.

As we remember the events of four years ago in this extraordinary year of 2020, we unite ourselves with every family and community which have suffered loss through violence. We highly value the service of law enforcement officers who put themselves in harm's way to protect and serve our community, and we honor the commitment of those who work for a just society. But we are too often reminded that our community and country are in need of continued healing and transformation.

Matters of race are woven into our history as a nation, which is one of the most diverse nations in the world. While our diversity has been essential to our greatness, it has also given us a legacy of tension and conflict. As a commission we renew our commitment to reforming unjust practices and policies that continue to accommodate some members in our society and hurt others, thus perpetuating inequality, inequity and injustice across the racial divide.

We further commit ourselves to reflect, pray and examine our consciences with respect to the sin of racism. We seek opportunities to dialogue with others whose faith is deep, lively and inclusive so that true listening can begin. We affirm this must include an identification and a rejection of systemic racial injustice in all of its forms. We believe that violence is never a just or acceptable response to any conflict, and that honest dialogue is the only pathway to promoting God's peace, social justice and real change.

With God's help, and by honestly acknowledging foundational problems and genuinely listening to one another, we believe real progress is possible. Black lives do matter. As Dr. Martin Luther King so wisely stated, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Diocesan Prayer for Racial Harmony

God our Father, You call us to love one another as You have loved us. We pray for the conversion of hearts in our Diocese of Baton Rouge to bring about racial harmony rooted in Your Son, Jesus Christ. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, strip us of our pride, mistrust and prejudices, so that we may be able to dialogue with one another to build communities where justice, peace and love flourish. We ask these blessings trusting in the infinite mercy of Jesus and the intercession of Mary our Mother. Amen.