

Archbishop Lori: How church teaching can help explain why ‘Black Lives Matter’



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Three of the most prominent words in today’s world are: Black Lives Matter. These words are emblazoned on streets, on public buildings and storefronts, on social media, in the windows of homes and indeed, at houses of worship. For some, these words are simply a call for racial justice long denied. For others, they are a call for fundamental changes in society. Many regard the words “Black Lives Matter” as self-evident. Others see them as divisive and partisan. At the outset, it is important to clarify that my efforts here are not intended to address, and certainly not to endorse, the specific political organization legally known as the BlackLivesMatter Global Network. Many ideological platforms and tactical strategies promoted under the umbrella of the phrase “Black Lives Matter” are in direct contradiction to church teaching and should rightfully be rejected by faithful Catholics. Rather, the question before us as Catholics is this: Is there a truth reflected in these words that transcends partisan platforms and ideological constructs, a truth that indeed resonates with the Gospel values that flow from our faith?

Catholic Social Teaching

In other words, what should these three words mean for us as Catholics? Within the church’s membership, we find the same range of opinions as in the larger society. Even so, the church’s social teaching offers important insights into the meaning of the phrase “Black Lives Matter.” What are those insights, and why are they important? Without intending to be comprehensive, I would like to attempt an answer to that question and offer a modest contribution to an important discussion that is going on within the church and beyond. In doing so, I also hope to help the Catholic community I serve to find common ground on which to seek racial justice.

Let me begin with this: Catholic social teaching is not an addendum to the Gospel but a living part of the church’s proclamation of our salvation in Christ Jesus. It is because of God’s love for each person and for the entire human family that the church speaks about matters such as economic and racial justice; the evil of abortion, capital punishment and euthanasia; the economy and the environment; religious liberty; the plight of immigrants and refugees; and a host of other social issues. What light, then, does the church’s social teaching shed on the words “Black Lives Matter”?

The Dignity of the Human Person

The cornerstone of the church’s social teaching is the truth concerning the dignity of the human person. Every person is created in God’s image and likeness and is endowed with inviolable dignity from the moment of conception until natural death. Each person is God’s handiwork and is made for God’s friendship. We further believe that the true dignity of the human person is most fully revealed in Christ our Redeemer, the Son of God who assumed our humanity. Becoming one of us, God’s Son united himself to each person and called us to conversion and eternal life. Indeed, our defense of human life and dignity must always be “clear, firm, and compassionate” and extend to every person at every stage of development. (See Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation “[Gaudete et Exsultate](#),” No. 101.)

Thus, the words “Black Lives Matter” ought to remind us that every Black person is made in God’s image and is endowed with inviolable dignity, from the moment of conception until natural death. But why single out Black people? Why not be content just to say that everyone is God’s handiwork? First, in saying “Black Lives Matter,” let us remember that we are part of a church whose past is stained by its participation in slavery and other forms of racism. Let us also remember that we live in a country where slavery was once the law of the land in both local statutes and the Constitution.

Slavery has long since been outlawed in the United States, and that constitutional provision has long since been repealed. But changing laws and even the Constitution itself is one thing, whereas changing human hearts is quite another. No one can justly deny that racism against people of color—which is a denial of their God-given dignity—persists in our society. From the recent killings of unarmed Black men and women by law enforcement to the subtle and pernicious suspicion endlessly endured by even the most highly accomplished Black men and women today, racism remains manifest in our society, and in our church. The words “Black Lives Matter” should prompt us to examine our own consciences with regard to racism and spur us on to advocate and work for racial justice.

As Catholics, we rightfully believe that the unborn and frail elderly are endowed with inviolable human dignity. The words “Black Lives Matter” should turn our attention not only to the grave injustices and indignities suffered throughout the Black community but especially to the smallest and most fragile Black lives whose situations are often made more perilous by poverty, unemployment, substandard schools, inadequate housing and poor health care. We cannot say we are fully “pro-life” if we routinely overlook the conditions in which far too many people of color live. To reiterate, the church’s teaching on human dignity extends through the entire continuum of human life. Being true to that teaching requires us to act on our beliefs, not just talk about them. If something “matters” to us, we act on it. Because Black Lives Matter, then each of us must do our part to create conditions in which every Black person has the opportunity to be born, to grow to maturity, to live in community and to flourish.

The Common Good

A second building block of Catholic social teaching is its focus on the common good. The words “common good” mean “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906). Two observations follow: First, built into the church’s mission of bringing salvation to every person and all peoples is the obligation to help create a society that is just and equitable, where everyone can flourish. Second, the notion of the common good does not mean that individual human dignity takes a back seat to the overall good of society. Rather, by promoting the dignity of each person at every stage of life we are helping to promote the common good of all. Similarly, when any group of people in society is hindered by bigotry and racial prejudice from attaining a healthy measure of fulfillment, the common good of the whole society is undermined.

It is for this reason also that Black Lives Matter. Some object that in affirming the importance of Black lives, we are implying that other lives do not matter. Quite the contrary. By at long last rejecting a persistent and sinful attitude that places less value on Black lives than on other lives, we are in fact serving the common good. Affirming the dignity of Black lives diminishes no one else’s dignity. The common good and dignity of all is fostered, however, when we work collaboratively across partisan and ideological lines, to create conditions in society wherein Black people and all people of color can equally flourish. By flourish, I mean: attain equity, live in peaceful neighborhoods, attend good schools, have access to job training, find full and satisfying employment, have access to good health care, and rise to positions of leadership in every field of endeavor and institution. The ascendancy of Black lives is not a zero-sum gain for everyone else. Rather, it is a source of strength.

Subsidiarity

A third building block of Catholic social teaching is subsidiarity. This means that insofar as it is possible and appropriate, problems are to be addressed and initiatives for the good are to be undertaken at the most local level. In other words, while the government and other large institutions, including churches, must consistently and continually provide help and care for those who are struggling, it is also important that local groups and communities be empowered to create conditions of human flourishing. Governments and big corporations and institutions do not have all the answers nor even all the resources needed to address chronic problems or lost opportunities. Rather, families and community-based groups must work together at the local level to create the conditions for human betterment.

This means that the homes and neighborhoods where Black people live matter. The de facto housing segregation that still exists in many places remains an indictment of society. All the more reason why it should matter to us that far too many of these predominantly Black neighborhoods are deteriorating and riddled with violence and drug use. It should matter to all of us that, in many such neighborhoods there are no stores or banks, no grocery stores or other essential services. To reiterate, government at all levels has a critical role to play in addressing these and other chronic problems.

Yet the residents of these neighborhoods are the most important agents of all. Participation and decision-making are ways in which people affirm that their own lives matter. This is all the more true for the Black community, whose autonomy was for far too long legally denied.

The foundation for building genuine autonomy all begins with our homes and families, regardless of our racial identity. It is in the home where a young person discovers his or her dignity. It is in the home where virtue is learned. It is in the home where the stage is set for success in school. It is in the home where young people first learn that their lives matter. It is in the home where our children—all of our children—must learn too that Black Lives Matter. Our churches, schools, community groups and other institutions and initiatives should be extensions of our homes and should invite and encourage the participation of neighbors.

Solidarity

A fourth pillar of Catholic social teaching is solidarity. This is the recognition that those who differ from us—by race, language or culture—are in fact our brothers and sisters. We are bound together by a common humanity and by equal dignity. We are bound together by a common call to friendship with God. God is the one who calls us to care for one another along life’s journey. The principle of solidarity calls us also to have a special love for those who are poor, vulnerable or oppressed.

When those who are not Black affirm that “Black Lives Matter,” they stand in solidarity with those who have been the victims of prejudice, brutality and deprivation. Authentic solidarity, however, is not *noblesse oblige*—the responsibility of “privileged” people to act with noble generosity toward the less privileged. Solidarity, in fact, means asking God’s help in purifying our hearts of any and every notion of privilege, whether explicit or implied. The words “Black Lives Matter” may rub some the wrong way because the plain meaning of the words undermines notions of privilege that are deeply engrained in our culture and in many minds and hearts.

To be sure, the words, “Black Lives Matter” mean different things to different people. Nonetheless, those same words should resonate with us as Catholics and indeed with all those who embrace the principles of Catholic social teaching. More than that, they should spur us on to action. By its nature, the church’s social teaching is not a mere statement of principle or policy but more a summons to heal the wounds of sin and division and to take up anew the task of building a society that is a civilization of truth and love. This we must do as a church community in partnership with others. Catholic schools and Catholic social services play a critical role, as do our parishes, in the cities and beyond. With the church’s social teaching as our guide, let us, as a Catholic community, build bridges of understanding so that we can say in wisdom, truth and love, that “Black Lives Matter.”