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Social Justice



Demonstrators in Seattle hold hands in front of a picture of George Floyd on June 1. (CNS/Reuters/Lindsey Wasson)



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Editor's note: *This article was updated June 4, 3:30 p.m. CDT to include the Sisters of Mercy and on June 5 at 10:15 a.m. CDT to include the School Sisters of St. Francis. It was updated June 8 at 11 a.m. CDT to include the Society of Sacred Heart sisters.*

Women religious in the United States are responding to the death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests engulfing cities by affirming the Black Lives Matter movement, acknowledging their congregations' history of white supremacy and personal white privilege, and calling for peaceful and concrete action toward racial justice.

Floyd, a 46-year-old black man suspected of using a counterfeit 20-dollar bill at a deli, died after Minneapolis, Minnesota, police officer Derek Chauvin pinned him to the ground May 25 with his knee on his neck for nearly nine minutes while Floyd said, "I can't breathe." A bystander recorded the incident. As of June 3, Chauvin faces a charge of second-degree murder, and the three officers who witnessed the incident who were also fired now face charges of aiding and abetting murder.

Since then, protests opposing police brutality toward the black community have swept the nation. Some protestors have vandalized local businesses while law enforcement has escalated violence in other cases.

Religious congregations and sister-led organizations reacted to the video of Floyd and the mass protests that followed through strongly worded statements condemning systemic racism. Offering their prayers for Floyd's family and for the country's change of heart, they also acknowledge that prayers alone will not solve the country's "original sin of racism," as many called it.

Related: Reckoning: White sisters respond to their own racism, to one historian's call for justice

Others call for June 6 to be a day of prayer, mourning and self-examination on racism and how to act as individuals and a community.

The National Black Sisters' Conference elevated the voices of black activists and writers of the past 150 years: Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Echoing the writing of Wells, the conference titled

their statement: "21st Century Lynchings in America: Our Red Record Statement."

"America's sensibility is still hardened in the twenty-first century. Black Americans still scream in horror. We still cannot breathe. Black Lives still do not Matter," they wrote.

> One-hundred and twenty-four years later we are still writing the same story! African American men, women, and children are still being lynched, murdered, and executed for playing with a toy gun, watching television in one's own home, and mistaken identity, driving or jogging while black, and being choked to death in cold blood by law enforcement officers, who have sworn to serve and protect.

Listing recent black victims — Dreasjon "Sean" Reed, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and Floyd — the conference said to never forget their names.

"If this country is to reclaim its moral stature, we must confess and atone for our original sin, or America will self-destruct as a nation," they wrote, listing concrete actions that "justice demands": for law enforcement to be held accountable for their compliance in racist activities and to be arrested and prosecuted when warranted as well as for the end of chokeholds and life-threatening forms of physical restraint during arrests and custody.

The conference also called upon Archbishop Bernard Hebda of St. Paul-Minneapolis and all bishops to denounce the violent hatred and racism:

> If the most recent pastoral letter on racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," written by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is to have any moral legitimacy, then our episcopal leaders must give more than lip-service to addressing the sin of racism that is destroying communities of color in this nation.



Black clergy in Minneapolis lead a June 2 march and prayer gathering at the site where George Floyd was pinned down May 25. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

Signing on and speaking out

Some congregations, like the Adrian Dominican Sisters, circulated and affirmed the National Black Sisters' Conference's statement. Others shared their own words, either as communities or conferences.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious, whose 40,000 members represent 80% of U.S. sisters, said in their May 30 statement that they "acknowledge our own complicity in institutional racism; we ask forgiveness of our sisters and brothers of color; and we pray for our nation's healing, and we know that is not enough."

Calling on the country's people to work with urgency to eliminate systemic racism, the conference said "it is time for bold, decisive action. We pledge to raise our voices and to act now to end this scourge which has cost us so dearly. It is long past

time to dismantle white privilege and rededicate ourselves to building God's beloved community."

As Region 6 of LCWR, six communities united their voices in condemnation: Dominican Sisters of Peace; Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky; Loretto Community; Ursuline Sisters of Louisville, Kentucky; Ursuline Sisters of Mount St. Joseph in Kentucky; and Sisters of St. Benedict of Ferdinand, Indiana.

The sisters noted that primarily white institutions police black communities and hold power in a criminal justice system that fails to hold police accountable for unlawful killings.

"There is no justice," they wrote. "How, then, can there be peace?"

They, too, call for fundamental police reform and for the June 6 day of prayer and reflection.

Tweet from @bvmsisters, Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, June 1, 2020.

The U.S. Federation of the Sisters of St. Joseph called racism "America's original sin" and said it diminishes us all.

"The resilience and well-being of humanity depends upon us dismantling these systemic, structural, and cultural realities of white supremacy, endemic to the fabric of our country," they wrote.

> As women religious and their partners in mission, we acknowledge our own complicity in institutional racism. We pray for our nation's healing, yet we know that is not enough. We ask forgiveness of people of color — without expecting or requiring it — to move into action. It is time for bold, decisive action — it is long past time to dismantle white privilege and rededicate ourselves to building God's beloved community. As a Federation, we vow to turn our words into precise actions addressing the institutional racism that lives within our institutions and within ourselves.

They also vow to commit to criminal justice reforms and ask for Americans to act with urgency in eliminating systemic racism.

"For the U.S. Federation, that requires us looking at all of our institutions and introducing guidelines to ensure that we are working to a more just society," which they said should include "an honest look" at the hiring and promotion practices at all levels within the federation and its congregations, schools, hospitals and other ministries.

> As we continue to work to dismantle institutional racism, we are all asked to do the deep, ongoing inner work that antiracism requires of us. This includes listening to, learning from, supporting, and elevating the black voices from within our sisters, partners in mission, and more broadly.

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The Sisters of the Order of St. Basil the Great wrote that they were particularly moved by Floyd's last words, "I can't breathe," as "few symbols are as powerful as breath," looking to the book of Genesis and Easter.

"We need Christ's peace now more than ever as social unrest spreads coast to coast. Righteous anger is an appropriate response to injustice, even called for, yet we must never allow it to devolve into rage. Peaceful demonstrations honor the spirit of Christian social action, while violence and theft betray it," wrote Sr. Dorothy Ann Busowski, the provincial superior.

"In order to heal the wounds of racism and injustice we cannot antagonize and alienate one another. We must find common ground and work together."

A litany of concrete commitments and reconciliations concluded the statement from the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, the National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd International Justice Peace Office.

They call on members of the criminal justice system and law enforcement agencies to "pursue accountability and realistic alternatives to the use of deadly force" and support police training that prioritizes respect for individuals while reducing fear that people of color experience toward law enforcement. They also urge police training to integrate counseling and anger management services into their resources and work

culture.

"If you do not speak out, if you do not sound the alarm when it is needed, you will be justly convicted by your silence," they wrote, quoting their foundress, St. Mary Euphrasia.



Philonise Floyd, brother of George Floyd, speaks at a June 2 rally in Houston. (CNS/Reuters/Adrees Latif)

The Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, acknowledged that as a predominantly white community, "we know we have work to do. We commit to further exploring our white privilege and understanding the intersectional nature of racism across the systems of power in our society."

"The path ahead will require all our efforts," they wrote. "All of us will, at times, be uncomfortable."

The U.S.-Ontario Province of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary wrote that they stand with those who advocate for dignity and respect of every human life

and support peaceful protests while condemning the destruction of property and harming of people in the process.

Recognizing that prayer and sympathy does not change the structures of injustice, the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary said they refuse to accept that their efforts end there.

They call on elected officials to make this moment "a movement toward genuine transformation and the restoring of right relationship," calling on others to join their work in conversion, repentance, "deep inner soul work that challenges attitudes of racial bias," profound listening and learning from the silenced and excluded, and to build loving relationships "in which we assume and draw forth the best of one another."

With a history of ministering among minority communities, the School Sisters of Notre Dame wrote in a statement that they are privileged to have firsthand experience collaborating and learning from these communities, embracing the Gospel and promoting dignity together.



Hundreds of demonstrators gather June 1 in Astoria Park in the New York City borough of Queens to protest the deaths of black people at the hands of police, most recently the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur looked to the Gospel of John, when Jesus said, "I have come to you so that you may have life to the full." They wrote: "Let us work tirelessly to make that Scripture passage a reality for everyone in this country."

In a newsletter to its network, Nuns and Nones called white supremacy a "spiritual pandemic" and sent guidelines for fighting white supremacy and online courses regarding structural inequities.

"This kind of learning is inseparable from our spiritual, evolutionary work as humans, and we are committed to learning together," wrote the Nuns and Nones team, adding that this group that unites spiritual millennials and Catholic sisters has spent

years expanding "the spiritual exploration of what it means to honor all life.

"Now, we have the chance to learn strategies for living in deep integrity with the web of life that connects us."

Mercy Sr. Mary Haddad, president and chief executive officer of Catholic Health Association of the United States, wrote that as a Catholic health ministry, "we must respond, not in violence, but in a renewed commitment to justice and peace. Let us work in solidarity to end the racism and violence that continues to devastate the health and well-being of too many individuals and communities."

The Sisters of Bon Secours, echoing LCWR and other congregations in acknowledging complicity in institutional racism, also wrote from a health care perspective: "As women of healing, who believe that the struggle for a more humane world is not an option, we re-commit ourselves to bring healing to the disease of racism in our own hearts, in our communities, our country and our world."

Quoting King and naming recent black victims of police, the Sisters of Mercy offer petitions for the African-American community, the families of those killed, and for the country to heal from its racial divide. "We stand in solidarity with the many calling for justice and an end to the extrajudicial killings of African Americans," they wrote in their May 29 statement.

The international and U.S. province leadership teams of the School Sisters of St. Francis also condemn Floyd's killing and others motivated by racial discrimination. They "pledge to uncover the roots of racism" in their lives and communities, as well as eradicate the systems that support it as they focus on "giving, healing, and defending life."

Also affirming the NBSC's "Red Record" statement, the Society of Sacred Heart sisters say they stand with the U.S. bishops' statement against racism, "Open Wide Our Hearts," and "pledge to raise our voice in opposition to acts of racial discrimination and to fight tirelessly against the sin of racism."

When the National Black Sisters' Conference in their statement called on people of faith to do more than pray, as U.S. sisters pledged to do, they added that the faithful should look to model Jesus' message to love one's neighbor.

And right now, they write, "our neighbor cannot breathe! Our neighbor is being lynched! Our neighbor is dying!"



People holding signs as hundreds of demonstrators gather June 1 in Astoria Park in the New York City borough of Queens to protest the deaths of black people at the hands of police, most recently the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

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