

Statement of the CEO of Lasallian Educational and Research Initiatives

John M. Vitek

9 June 2020

The body of George Floyd is laid to rest today.

To stand at the graveside of a loved one as they are lowered into the earth, dirt layered upon their coffin, sealing them from the oxygen upon which their life once depended, evokes in all gathered a gasping for breath, as if it too might be our final one.

The events of the past two weeks have left many, if not all, of us gasping for air—the air of understanding, the air of justice, the air of equity, the air of unity. But they have also unleashed the airs of hatred, division, casting of judgment, and violence.

And so yet again we as a society are forced, rightly so, to look straight into the face of the complex realities that confront us and choose a path—one that divides or unites, one that stems from love or hatred, one that opens us up or closes us in.

The body of George Floyd, our brother, is laid to rest today.

As a Lasallian community, however, we cannot rest. We cannot rest until that day when the poverty and marginalization, inequity and exclusion that we have created is eradicated through our fierce devotion to charity, driven by zeal for courageous and compassionate lives—lives of radical commitment to the Gospel's two Greatest Commandments: the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Br. Robert Schieler, our superior general, reminds us, "In the readings of the liturgy for June 3, Saint Paul writes to Timothy that the 'word of God is not chained.'" The Word of God is not chained! And yet the lives of so many of our brothers and sisters in this world are strangled each day by the chains of injustice, inequity, unacceptance.

The life of Breonna Taylor was chained.

The life of Antwon Rose II was chained.

The life of Willie Tillman was chained.

The lives of Mark Carson, CeCe McDonald, Angie Zapata—chained.

Chained down by the systemic effects of racism, bigotry, sexual bias. Chained to the point of death by the hateful actions of those unable to see through the lens of Saint Paul—"the Word of God is not chained." Because the Word of God is LOVE, COMPASSION, GOODNESS, CHARITY, FORGIVENESS, UNDERSTANDING, JUSTICE, HEALING.

The Word of God does not imprison, but frees.

The Lasallian tradition is founded in solidarity with those who are poor, underserved, and disenfranchised. The Lasallian lens is one that sees the dignity of every human person. As Lasallians, we cannot accept, stand idly by, or in any way contribute to the racism, inequity, and injustices that are endemic in society. As Brother Robert reminds us, “These evils are not easily eradicated.” We must commit ourselves to participate with all people of good will, “to bring about systemic change for a more just and peaceful world for all persons”—persons of every race, every ethnicity, every gender and sexual identity, every faith.

We are called to be healers and unifiers. This requires that we first open our eyes, open our hearts, to see and to hear things we don’t typically see or hear. While we all know sorrow and hardship in our own way, few of us have experienced the inescapable lament of the soul that accompanies the person who wakes each day wondering, Will today be the day that I will die at the hands of those who fear me, or hate me, just because they think I’m not “like them”—just because of the pigmentation of my skin or the gender of the person I love or because of how I self-identify?

The Lasallian community is founded in a community of brothers. And it has expanded these past 350 years throughout the world as a community of brothers and sisters. We are a community of Christians, Muslims, Jews, agnostics, and atheists; a community of persons red, black, brown, white, blue, and flowery; a community of gay, queer, straight, agender, bigender, cisgender, transgender, two-spirit, ze/hir.

We are brothers and sisters. On this date some 300+ years ago, Saint John Baptist de La Salle wrote his Sixteenth Meditation for the Time of Retreat. He reflected that happiness will be possessed only when we ‘restore the robe of innocence’ in recognizing that all persons have within themselves and are penetrated by the divinity of God. We must be ‘guardian angels’ for the children of the poor.

We are brothers and sisters of all humanity. How will we, in this moment, renew our calling to be “guardian angels” of those whose lives are disrupted every day by the injustices, inequities, and biases endemic to our society? How will we remove our unconscious blinders to see what needs to be seen, hear what needs to be heard, heal what needs to be healed, reconcile what needs to be reconciled?

There is much for Saint Mary’s Press, and now LERI, to be proud of in the fulfillment of our mission since 1943, particularly in the advocacy for social justice, including our multiple publications and resources on Catholic social teaching and justice, our Voices project that worked to give voice to young women, our founding of Instituto Fe y Vida, our collaboration with the National Black Catholic Congress in creating the *African American Catholic Youth Bible*, our collaboration with Native people and the California Conference of Bishops in developing a course to reconcile the relationship between the Native peoples and Christian expansion, our course *Understanding Racism*, our deep listening and giving voice to the religiously disenfranchised, and our commitment to support works in care of those who are poor.

But it is not enough. There is more to be done. I must look closer, into every corner of what we do and how we do it, to identify what more we can and must and will do to take up the zeal of our founder who strove ardently to eradicate the distinction between the haves and the have nots. Brother Robert calls upon us as Lasallians to stand in solidarity with all those who fight for justice through peaceful means of love and compassion. I don't yet know fully what this means for LERI, but I am committing to bringing forward people who can help me and us figure it out. It is not enough to ensure we have no explicit or overt bias; the hard work will be to identify the hidden, unconscious, and subtle bias that has penetrated us as it has all of society. This is the heart, I believe, of the call to solidarity.

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III reminds us of the psalmist's lament:

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
And day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
(Psalm 13:2)

How long? Until that day when the Word of God is unchained in the human heart and we stand as guardians of solidarity, and proclaim:

Ahmaud Arbery, you are my brother.
George Floyd, you are my brother.
Breonna Taylor, you are my sister.

Lasallian Educational and Research Initiatives stands united with the Districts, Region and International Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in denouncing the killing of George Floyd.

I invite all who wish to join in 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silence, conscious of the necessity of breath and the right of all persons to breathe.

Sources

Br. Robert Schieler, FSC, attribution to his letter to The Brothers and Lasallian Partners of RELAN, 5 June 2020.

Rev. Dr. Otis Moss III, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree: A Requiem for Ahmaud Arbery*.

The Scripture excerpt in this message is from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](https://www.biblica.com/)® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®