June 8, 2020

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff:

We look forward to welcoming students, faculty, and staff back to campus for what will be an unprecedented semester in this time of the novel coronavirus. You will be receiving information about protocols and practices we will together undertake to keep the campus community healthy. In this letter, though, I want to raise another issue that must have prominence during our time together in the coming academic year.

We were all horrified by the video of the terrible killing of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis as he pleaded with one of them to take his knees off his neck so he could breathe. As heartrending as the video was in itself, it has evoked anger and frustration among the black community—and all people of goodwill—over the long legacy of racism in America, of which Mr. Floyd’s killing was just one manifestation. It has also led to soul-searching among us all, myself included, about the reality of racism in our society.

Mr. Floyd’s killing has been a painful reminder for our black students, faculty, and staff of racism in our society. Racism damages everyone, but the weight of its burden falls on our black classmates, colleagues, and friends. I want to say to the black members of the Notre Dame community that I am sorry for the pain and the hardship of that burden in your lives and the lives of those you love. Each of us...
must be aware of that pain among members of our community and be ready to offer support and listen as appropriate.

The US Catholic bishops declared unequivocally in a 2018 pastoral letter that "racism is a life issue" (*Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*). At Notre Dame, we are committed to the dignity of every person, to building a community in which all can flourish, and to solidarity with all, particularly with the most vulnerable. These principles compel us, institutionally and individually, to combat the sin of racism, and work to include all fully in our community. If we are committed only to certain life issues, that commitment is at best shallow and at worst hypocritical. As Pope Francis has said, “We cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.” We must be whole-hearted in defending the inviolable, God-given human dignity of every person.

We know we have work to do in living fully the ideals we proclaim. Our black students and colleagues often feel less included in the Notre Dame community many of us cherish, and sometimes feel the sting of remarks and actions that make them feel demeaned or excluded. We must be honest about our failings, and commit to do better. I make that commitment, and wish to work with you to combat the blight of racism wherever it exists—on our campus, in our nation, and in our world.

In the coming weeks, I will be discussing with University vice presidents and deans further steps we can take to respond to this moment that is both tragic and a call for conversion and recommitment. As we all return to campus, we must continue this conversation, as together we seek ways to live up more fully to the ideals of Notre Dame and to combat the evil of racism in our society.

In Notre Dame,

Rev. John I. Jenkins, C.S.C.
President