

Justice and Race at Bellarmine and Beyond

Dear Members of the Bellarmine University Campus Community:

The grand jury decisions in Ferguson, MO, and Staten Island, NY, not to indict white police officers who killed unarmed black men have tapped deep wells of feeling across the nation and on our campus as well. I am very proud, and not a bit surprised, that many students, faculty and staff at Bellarmine are thinking deeply and expressing complicated thoughts and feelings – in settings both formal and informal -- about our criminal justice system and, more broadly, about social justice in America.

Racism as an issue certainly permeates these matters. But they are really, at their heart, issues of fairness and justice that transcend race and in the process, have occasioned the outrage of millions of American citizens -- across all races and colors, all faith traditions and no faith tradition.

As reasonable citizens, we wholeheartedly support the rule of law on our campus, in our cities and in the nation, as well as the importance of enlightened, professional and responsible police enforcement of the law. Further, we respect, support and appreciate police officers, men and women, black, white and other, who put themselves in harm's way and risk their lives each day as they work to protect us and carry out their duties and responsibilities. We also realize that, in the moment, split-second life or death decisions are made.

But all of the above having been said, it appears to many thousands of Americans of all backgrounds that excessive, lethal force most likely was used by the police in Ferguson, MO and in Staten Island, NY, in their efforts to get the suspects under control -- and that the criminal justice system did not hold anyone accountable. These circumstances perpetuate a perception that the system condones the deaths. This perception has triggered protests and demonstrations in cities across America.

Last week's peaceful demonstration at the Late Knight Breakfast on Bellarmine's campus by our Black Student Union students came about in response to the above matters, and to me evidenced an encouraging and welcome intellectual, moral and ethical awareness of the serious social problems we must address.

I certainly can imagine and understand the annoyance and dissatisfaction of some of our students at the Breakfast who just wanted to eat and relax at exam time. And I know that a decision by an individual NOT to participate in such a protest is by no means an indication that the individual is a racist. At the same time, free speech protest often does bother people. It is meant to bother people. We were told by the organizers in advance that this protest would occur peacefully and thus take place respectfully and with minimal disruption, and the BSU organizers were true to their word.

Failures of the criminal justice system are as old as this nation but virally communicated media images on television, internet technology and social media are not. In particular, anonymous comments on social media at worst constitute acts of cowardice and at best fail to promote any understanding of substance.

At Bellarmine, we encourage free speech, and have policies and procedures in place that allow peaceful protest and also require peace and safety and the basic functioning of the University.

Going forward, what should the University do?

First, we should remember our institutional values. We find our Catholic identity in the inclusive spirit of Thomas Merton. Regardless of our various individual faith traditions, or lack thereof, regardless of our color or our socio-economic or geographic background or gender identity, our Bellarmine values call us to respect the intrinsic dignity of each individual as a whole person.

In *New Seeds of Contemplation* (p. 76), Thomas Merton wrote this:

I cannot treat other (people) as (people) unless I have compassion for them. I must have at least enough compassion to realize that when they suffer they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer... I must learn to share with others their joys, their sufferings, their ideas, their needs, their desires. I must learn to do this not only in the cases of those who are of the same class, the same profession, the same race, the same nation as myself, but when (people) who suffer belong to other groups, even to groups that are regarded as hostile.

Going forward, the University must work closely with our faculty, students, and staff to facilitate and encourage appropriate discussions, lectures, panels, courses and more -- to help our campus community engage with the complex issues at the root of these problems and, hopefully, to influence and encourage improvement in the situation at our University, and therefore in the region, nation and world. At various meetings with students, faculty and staff, I have heard many good suggestions along these lines. It was suggested, among other ideas, that the institution invest in a campus wide climate audit to assess Bellarmine's readiness and openness to diversity and multicultural issues. This would give us an objective read and new baseline data to develop a University plan related to improving awareness and education of diversity on campus.

There was a brief discussion of how we might infuse the issues of diversity and multicultural awareness in our institutional efforts related to review of General Education requirements.

And there was a general discussion of how to help students find their voice and identity with this complex and difficult situation because, in finding one's voice, we often find comfort, support and strength. These are important ideas. We will follow up and follow through.

But the most important thing we can do -- for ourselves and for each other -- is to embrace and live the core values of this place, Bellarmine. We educate talented, diverse students with respect for each individual's intrinsic dignity and infinite value. We embrace new people and new ideas with openness and generosity of spirit. We are dedicated to the pursuit of enlightenment and understanding – and to the solidarity of the human spirit, which transcends ethnic, religious and social divisions.

In finding peace, and in seeking truth, we can and will work together to make Bellarmine a better place for everyone.

Sincerely yours,
Dr. Joseph J. McGowan
President