

Can Catholics support 'Black Lives Matter'?

Years before a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on George Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, "Black Lives Matter" was already a polarizing statement in a country with deep racial fault lines.

But as the phrase "Black Lives Matter" has become more familiar amid protests and civil unrest sparked by Floyd's death on May 25, it has become even more highly divisive in society and in the Church. The conflict arises from some associating the phrase with the organization Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation Inc., which holds views that oppose Church teaching, while others associate it only with the movement to raise awareness of police brutality against people of color.

Deacon Harold Burke-Sivers, a Black Catholic speaker, author and radio host, told Our Sunday Visitor that he believes people in general have difficulty separating Black Lives Matter as a movement for racial justice from the organization incorporated by leaders whose progressive politics affirm homosexuality, condemn "cisgender privilege" and propose disrupting "the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure," according to its website.

"There's an entire other agenda here they're promoting that has nothing to do with Black Lives Matter," Deacon Burke-Sivers said. "By their own statements, that's why it's problematic, and that's why Catholics cannot affirm the organization or be part of it whatsoever."

Beginnings of the movement

As a social movement, Black Lives Matter originated in 2013 as

a form of “hashtag activism” on social media after a Florida jury acquitted George Zimmerman of murder for shooting 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager who was walking through a neighborhood when Zimmerman confronted him and fatally shot him in an ensuing struggle.

The movement grew rapidly and became recognized for street demonstrations in 2014 after police officers that year killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. Both were unarmed young Black men.

From 2014 to 2016, three women who started the hashtag and its call to action organized a network of more than 30 BLM chapters around the country. But as a movement, Black Lives Matter is essentially a decentralized network of activists with no hierarchy or leadership structure.

Darren Davis, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, told Our Sunday Visitor, that he sees Black Lives Matter primarily as a social movement to call the public’s attention to violence and injustices committed by police against people of color.

“That’s the way it originated, and I think on both sides there has been an attempt to mischaracterize it,” said Davis, the co-author of a 2011 report, sponsored by Notre Dame and the National Black Catholic Congress, that offered insights into Black Catholics’ spiritual needs.

“We as Catholics, we have a choice,” Davis said. “We can use our intellect and our Catholic Social Teaching lens to properly perceive the human rights and civil rights aspects of these organizations. We can decide what these organizations mean to us, not necessarily how they are articulated in the media and by other groups.”

Affirming human dignity

While acknowledging an incompatibility between some of the Church's moral teachings and several planks in the organization's platform, several Black Catholic leaders told Our Sunday Visitor that the movement aligns with some Catholic Social Teaching principles, such as solidarity and human dignity.

"We can work with Black Lives Matter, the organization, on the stuff we agree on. There is some common ground there. We agree on the principle of respect for human dignity," said [Deacon Larry D. Oney](#), a Catholic speaker who lives in the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Tia Noelle Pratt, a sociologist who specializes in systemic racism in the Catholic Church and how that impacts African American Catholic identity, said there is enough in common between the Church and BLM to stand shoulder to shoulder on the issue of the racial equality and justice.

"These are the things that Black Lives Matter stands for. There are ways for us to work together, to find commonality in order to achieve a more just world," said Pratt, who curates the [#BlackCatholics Syllabus](#), a collection of resources related to Black Catholics in the United States. She told Our Sunday Visitor that people should "take the time to look at what the movement is about instead of what other people are saying about the movement, because there's a difference."

Problematic manifesto

Still, Catholic leaders warned, there are legitimate reasons to be cautious.

"Obviously there are some things there that are antithetical to the teachings of the Church, social justice wise and otherwise. I can't embrace the organization and its platform,

and no Christian really can,” Deacon Oney said.

The Black Lives Matter organization’s website – under the “What We Believe” tab – includes a handful of statements that Catholic critics often point out, including working toward dismantling “cisgender privilege”; disrupting “the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure”; and fostering “a queer-affirming network ... with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking.”

Individual BLM chapter websites also contain terminology, inspired by the ideologies of gender theory and class struggle, that critics see as evidence of Marxist influence. Some chapters say they are working to end the structural oppressions they argue are embedded in capitalism, “heteropatriarchy” and transphobia.

“The Black Lives Matter organization’s manifesto is very problematic for any Catholic Christian person,” Deacon Oney said.

Critics often blame Black Lives Matter – along with leftist groups like Antifa – for torching and looting businesses, and assaulting bystanders, and the organization has been criticized by some for not explicitly condemning the looting and violence.

“The problem with the BLM (organization) is that they associate themselves with not just things we disagree with, but the violence, the vandalism, the looting, things like that,” said Deacon Burke-Sivers, who suggested that makes authentic dialogue with Black Lives Matter difficult.

“BLM is in conflict with Church teaching regarding marriage, family and the sanctity of life,” wrote Bishop Thomas A. Daily of Spokane, Washington, in a July 5 statement. “Moreover, it is disturbing that BLM has not vocally condemned the recent violence that has torn apart so many cities. Its silence has not gone unheard. One need not stand with BLM to stand for

Black lives.”

Using Catholic Social Teaching

While there are a number of principles stated on the Black Lives Matter website that stand in opposition to the Church, there are also stances that fall in line with Catholic Social Teaching, including a call to “practice justice, liberation and peace in our engagements with one another” and a desire to work for “freedom and justice for Black people and, by extension, all people.”

“If we as Catholics were to approach this from a Catholic Social Teaching perspective and an open mind, I think we would perceive Black Lives Matter very differently,” said Davis, from Notre Dame. “We need to be able to obviously evaluate these things on their own terms and what they stand for. But when politics get involved, we become motivated to perceive these things in a different way.”

Deacon Oney spoke of the need to separate the Black Lives Matter movement from the organization. He said Catholics could even engage the organization on some social justice work while being mindful not to endorse its stances on human sexuality and gender identity.

“We can agree what we can agree on, but there has to be a point of demarcation, and that’s something we do all the time,” Deacon Oney said.

Call for conversion of heart

In a July 2 pastoral statement, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of Little Rock, Arkansas, framed Black Lives Matter primarily as a social movement that can help people to see and understand the injustices often experienced by people of color.

“All lives matter, of course, but as a society we don’t act that way – and that’s the point,” said Bishop Taylor, who

outlined the structural injustices that people of color in the United States often experience vis-à-vis the criminal justice system, health care, employment and education.

Said Bishop Taylor, "I hope this has helped you understand why it is so important for us to insist that Black Lives Matter and to view the task before us through the pro-life lens of our Christian belief in the God-given intrinsic dignity of every person, in this case Black people, rather than the more secular Marxist-inspired class struggle lens that some would propose and which sometimes gets disproportionate coverage in the news."

Bishop Shelton Fabre of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, said in a prepared statement to Our Sunday Visitor that "many organizations" have been responding to a national awakening on the long-term effects of racism and the demand for justice.

"As we are not going to see eye-to-eye with every organization on every solution, our focus must be on a conversion of our own hearts and what we, ourselves, can do to bring forward prudent solutions," said Bishop Fabre, who serves as chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism.

Deacon Oney noted that Catholic priests marched with Rev. Martin Luther King, a Baptist, during the Civil Rights era, and that Catholics today working on social justice and pro-life matters often work alongside people of other denominations and faith traditions who do not agree with all of the Catholic Church's moral teachings.

Said Deacon Oney: "Can the Church, which has high morals and a memorialized body of social justice teachings, can we not find some point of agreement to march with our brothers and sisters who may be confused about their sexuality but are righteous in their resistance against racism and social inequity? I say yes."

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.