June 5, 2020

Ave Maria Law Community,

For my message this week, I thought it essential for all of us to pause for a moment to reflect on the killing of Mr. George Floyd and the following riots over the last eleven days.

We hear and see the pain of the Black community in America. We know the injustice that has endured for far too many years. It persists, as so grotesquely demonstrated by Officer Derek Chauvin’s killing of unarmed George Floyd, as Mr. Floyd pleaded to breathe. Perhaps no greater example could we witness of racism’s continued presence, than an officer of the state inexcusably suffocating Mr. Floyd for almost nine minutes, while three other officers stood by with complicity.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., stated: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Police brutality anywhere, eats away at the very core of our nation. Wherever it occurs, it threatens our well-being, everywhere. This goes beyond the horrific actions against Mr. George Floyd. Racism in all forms is ugly, ignorant, and evil.

Mistreating individuals based on the color of their skin will go down as one of mankind’s most sinister and most ignorant practices. How senseless it is to divide and pit people against one another based simply on their skin color? And yet, we have witnessed it throughout our nation’s history, as well as in every society across the globe. No country has been immune to racism’s virulent reach. Racism roots are long and pervasive; permanently uprooting them, notwithstanding how ridiculous and illogical they are, will not be easy, and certainly will not be achieved overnight.

This is where we come in, as a community. The charge ahead of us could not be any more important, nor could it be more formidable. Our way of life, our nation, our future, is in our hands.

As you know, Ave Maria Law’s motto is Fides et Ratio—Faith and Reason.

Our school was founded on the Faith of the Catholic religion, the Catholic name derives from Latin and Greek terms that mean “universal.” Christ gave us this gift—he gave his life for all women and all men, young and old, poor and rich, white and black, and everyone in between, all shades, all sizes, all cultures. We are one human race.
Our Faith teaches us to love one another. To respect one another. To treat each other with dignity.

As Ave Maria Law, we must do nothing less. Let this time in our lives mark our commitment to stand for those ideals, to exhibit that character, and carry it forth into society to lead our communities in ways that respect and honor our fellow men and women, especially those most marginalized.

Reason is the second half of our motto, and the situation we face today requires us to exercise our highest levels of reason.

Reason tells us that when time after time, black unarmed men are killed, we have a serious problem. Reason tells us when perpetrators who kill unarmed black men escape justice, time and time again, we have a serious problem.

But reason also dictates for us to approach solving the problem in ways that do not themselves employ racism, lawlessness, greed, and unaccountability. Peaceful protests are more than justified, they are legitimate means to express rightful outrage. Peaceful protest is the way of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The acts of violence, however, that have swept across our nation’s cities are inexcusable, and they deeply undermine sincere efforts to effectively address racism against people of color.

For instance, the killing of retired police Captain David Dorn by looters in St. Louis was tragic. It was downright evil. His life was taken away from him because of greed. Talking about his senseless death is not a diversion. By all accounts, Captain David Dorn was a very good man, who spent his life admirably serving his community as a police officer, and then he died attempting to protect his community as a civilian. His family, friends, and those whose life he touched, mourn him.

Violence is never the answer. Nor is the answer to paint all police officers with the stain of Chauvin. Captain Dorn was nothing like Chauvin, and that is also true for many, many police officers across our nation. Most officers abhor the acts applied to Mr. George Floyd. Most officers walk out their doors each and every day and put their lives on the line, to protect our families and our communities. They would like nothing more than our communities to live in harmony, to come home at night, and for their communities to be safe for others as well as their own families.

Reason also dictates that we do not incite distrust of other races in our society. Again, how senseless is it to divide and categorize people based simply on their skin color? Attempting to make the death of George Floyd into class warfare, is also destructive. Those are not strategies for finding long-term success to creating equality, justice, and instilling respect and dignity for each other.

The road ahead is arduous, but worth it. Your calling is nothing short of saving our nation. Our nation is not perfect. Unfortunately, our history, and our current condition, includes racism against black Americans. That is a very ugly truth. That evil is real. We need not tolerate it; indeed, we have a sacred duty to eradicate it. A central objective of our school is to produce graduates who will work to achieve a more just society. We need to hold Officer Chauvin and
the other officers who stood by accountable. We need to hold every officer who abuses their power accountable.

But we must do so without destroying the rule of law in our wake. The ends never justify the means. How we do things matters. That goes for how we administer law enforcement and justice, as well as how we protest.

Police officers should wear body cameras and cameras on their cruiser that cannot be turned off by the officer. If it were not for video, we would never have known the actual facts that killed Mr. George Floyd. Moreover, every interrogation of suspects should be recorded. These are simple measures that would increase accountability and at the same time, would increase effective law enforcement. We also need to increase the diversity in our police forces and agencies administering justice. And we need more lawyers of color.

I truly believe we live in the greatest nation on earth. With our Constitution, and our economic system of capitalism, you, uniquely have the opportunity to lead the world in providing equality and justice. Opportunity is the operative word here. To improve our country without losing it, Faith and Reason must prevail.

Fides et Ratio,

Kevin Cieply
President and Dean