

September 27, 2020

Dear parishioners,

Recently, I was asked to serve as a panelist on a Catholic Charities' "Black Lives Matter" webinar. The webinar addressed the stunning wealth gap in Washington, DC. In my role as Director of Catholic Charities' Financial Stability Network, I see first-hand how past discrimination and systemic racism have contributed to today's wealth gap in our community. Based upon a 2014 Urban Institute study, the typical White household in DC had wealth of \$284,000. Black households, in contrast, had wealth of \$3,500.

The panel was asked to reflect upon a podcast that was listened to by the webinar participants. The podcast, "40 Acres and a Mule," described how Black people have faced more than 150 years of deliberately constructed barriers to wealth building. Some of the highest barriers were embedded by design in federal law and regulations. The title of the podcast comes from a promise Abraham Lincoln made to all the emancipated slaves in 1865. This promise was broken by Lincoln's successor as president, Andrew Johnson.

The podcast vividly describes an institution known as "Jim Crow" that has shaped our country's approach to race and economic justice. "Jim Crow" is the legalized segregation and suppression of basic rights that defined the American apartheid era. Although the country rightly celebrates the achievements of the Civil Rights movement, the podcast points out the severe economic damage incurred in that era. In particular, the federal government's housing policies during this era engineered a large part of today's wealth gap. The podcast focuses on the impact of these housing policies on the residents living in Chicago's South Side. The podcast explains how Black Chicagoans had their housing options (and wealth) blocked by the federal government through "redlining" and resulting "block-busting" and "contract selling."

I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. During the panel discussion, I shared my vivid memories of this systemic racism. I described what I saw in our neighborhood in the 50s and 60s. I also reflected upon what was most troubling to me during this period of injustice---the **silence** of my family, my relatives, my South Side Irish community and my parish church.

At the end of the webinar each panelist was asked to offer her or his thoughts on a path forward. I offered that implementing the Catholic Social Teaching principle of "solidarity" was our best path forward. Pope Francis explains in "Evangelii Gaudium" that "the word 'solidarity' is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes **the creation of a new mindset** which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few. Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them" (EG 188-189) (emphasis added).

Peace,

Deacon Jim