

# Does Black Life Matter? – Why Racism is a Right to Life Issue

-Dr. Ansel Augustine

*“Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace;  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
And where there is sadness, joy...”*

DOES BLACK LIFE MATTER? Once again our country is at a crossroads with its “unfinished business” of race relations. Within the past few years headlines have shown the stories of unarmed black men being killed by police. Either through blog comments, or in regular discussions, the opinions of who was at fault, usually differs depending on the race of the individual speaking. Now I don’t want to put everyone into general categories, because not all black people think the same way and not all white people think the same way either, but for the sake of brevity in this article I will use generalities. Now I’m writing through the lens of a black young adult male from New Orleans, Louisiana. My city’s race and poverty issues were brought to the international spotlight during Hurricane Katrina. The world watched as people were stranded on rooftops or in the Superdome, or on highways with no help in sight. Many people simply asked, “Why didn’t they just leave?” For many, the cost of evacuating was too much. For others, they did not have anywhere to go. In fact the way the storm was covered varied by race. This Associated Press photo shows how the media differed on how they reported about blacks and whites struggle to find food in a flooded New Orleans.



**AP Associated Press** AP - Tue Aug 30, 11:31 AM ET

A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina did extensive damage when it

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**AFP** 3:47 AM ET

Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana. (AFP/Getty Images/Chris Grayther)

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This is the root of the problem in many race related misunderstandings, is that there are two different “Americas” that people live in today, A white and black (or minority) one. Take for instance the Bundy Ranch incident that occurred in Nevada.

A large group of armed white men marched in battle formation with one of them perched as a sniper with his rifle pointed at Bureau of Land Management Officials.

The government did not fire any shots or tear gas at these men and eventually left the men (Bundy militia) alone. The protest took place because a Cliven Bundy refused to pay his taxes and refused to pay fees associated with his cattle grazing on federal land. He and his supporters threatened armed revolt and secession against the United States, but they were not harmed. Now, let's move to Ferguson, Missouri where UNARMED African American protesters were grieving and enraged over the death of an UNARMED young black man, Michael Brown, who was shot several times by a white police officer. These protesters, who were there peacefully during a candle light vigil, were met with police in full military/SWAT gear. This time the sniper was an officer with his gun pointed toward the protesters. In Ferguson, law enforcement vastly overreacted in the face of peaceful black protesters, while at the Bundy Ranch, law enforcement vastly underreacted in the face of a white armed militia that threatened the government. Many of the images of police with dogs, signs of frustrated protesters, supporters of the aggressor, the divide between law enforcement and protesters, are reminiscent of the civil rights era [http://www.vox.com/xpress/2014/8/18/6030265/john-oliver-ferguson-monologue?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_campaign=eZRaklein&utm\\_content=monday](http://www.vox.com/xpress/2014/8/18/6030265/john-oliver-ferguson-monologue?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=eZRaklein&utm_content=monday)

Another instance of this is to ask why an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, was gunned down in the street while a white teenager, James Eagen Holmes, who killed 12 people and injured 70 others after opening fire in a movie theatre, was treated humanely.

Why was Eric Garner choked to death by New York police via excessive force for supposedly selling loose cigarettes, but Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the Boston Bombing suspects, is able to receive a trial for his actions?

Why was John Crawford III, a young black father shopping in Wal Mart, shot by police in an Ohio for carrying BB gun that the store was selling, but many white people can "open carry" lethal rifles in Wal Marts without any harassment from law enforcement?

Why was Ezell Ford, a mentally ill black man in Los Angeles, shot in the back 3 times by officers after following orders and lying on the ground, but Jared Lee Loughner, who murdered 19 people during a shooting spree in Tucson, Arizona, which also injured U.S. Representative, Gabrielle Giffords, was captured alive despite the high victim count.

Why is black life disregarded and results in the death of John Crawford, Trayvon Martin, Tarika Wilson, Malcolm Ferguson Renisha McBride, Amadou Diallo, Yvette Smith, Oscar Grant, Sean Bell, Kathryn Johnson, Rekia Boyd, Walter Scott, and many other black lives that are lost in this country that do not receive news coverage?

Why does the media tend to treat White suspects better than black victims?  
([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/media-black-victims\\_n\\_5673291.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/media-black-victims_n_5673291.html))

Why are we, as a society numb to this trend?  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/16/melissa-harris-perry-black-men-killed-by-police\\_n\\_5684588.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/16/melissa-harris-perry-black-men-killed-by-police_n_5684588.html?utm_hp_ref=tw)

## DOES BLACK LIFE MATTER?

*“...O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek  
To be consoled as to console;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive;  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life...”*

Many of my white counterparts, have asked, “Why are black people so mad about this?” or “Why is this such a big deal?”

-We (as black people, or people who understand our situation) should not have to explain why it is not acceptable for unarmed teenagers to be gunned down by the police who are supposed to protect and serve, not judge and execute.

-We shouldn't have to explain that black males' lives do matter.

-We shouldn't have to defend against the statement that some make, “You all should just dress better.” What was Martin Luther King wearing when he was shot? And does clothing automatically make someone a criminal?

-We shouldn't have to explain that the right of due process – which many of the unarmed black men that were recently shot by police were not afforded – is in the Constitution - TWICE.

-We shouldn't have to explain that the correct response to these tragedies IS NOT, “What about black on black crime?” The police are not hired to execute unarmed people – no matter their race.

-We shouldn't have to explain that many of these recent instances of police killings of unarmed black men were forms of public executions. Also, public executions do not take place without a trial.

-We shouldn't have to explain that many black, and other minority, communities do not trust police, or the justice system, due to past experiences of racial bias, intimidation, and use of excessive force (<http://news.msn.com/us/police-mistrust-still-prevalent-years-later>).

-We shouldn't have to explain why we fight back when attacked.  
<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/08/six-reasons-black-person-might-resist-arrest-michael-brown-dante-parker-eric-garner>

-We shouldn't have to remind people that many of us are also citizens of this country and deserve the rights that others receive as well.

As Jesse Williams from the show “Grey’s Anatomy” stated in an interview, “White people have the privilege of being treated like human beings.” Much of the anger in the black community is that in many of these national cases, the media, either led by police reports, or just media bias, tend to make black victims out to be “thugs worthy of their own death,” as Williams states,

“Unarmed boys who were supposedly threats because being a black man in this country is sometimes an act of aggression in itself (<http://newsone.com/3045626/jesse-williams-mike-brown-ferguson/>).

As singer John Legend stated at a concert following the Michael Brown shooting, “One of our original sins in this country has been racism and slavery. And we still haven’t figured out how to solve that problem.” The root of much of the anger in this country, and by ignoring this fact and the fact that much of the privilege that many white people benefit from came from the expense and exploitation of other races, leads to situations like the one that we are facing now. Bottom line is when one group of people is allowed to do something without it raising suspicion is a form of privilege, but to assume someone, just because of their appearance, is a threat is sinful and harmful to the Body of Christ because we are ALL made in the image and likeness of God. Even the excuse, “I don’t see color,” needs to stop being used by white people because by not seeing my color, you don’t acknowledge me. You don’t acknowledge my history and culture. You don’t acknowledge my, or my people, daily struggles and the gifts and contributions that come with our skin color.

The issue comes back again. DOES BLACK LIFE MATTER?

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I know that there are many out there that will feel offended by the fact that someone would even write this down, but as a people of God, we must speak the TRUE truth. As a true Body of Christ, we must care about all our brothers’ needs. Pope Francis challenges us to look out for the needs of our brothers and sisters, especially the most in need. The silence of many of our church leaders on this issue is hurtful to many and for us. To really be an entity that values the “dignity of the human being” we must be vocal on issues that deal with injustice to humanity.

Many may not understand why this article was written, or that we are in a “post-racial” America. This is definitely not the case as what was being witnessed in Ferguson, and other cities throughout the world. Unfortunately, our original sin of racism still haunts us today (<http://www.upworthy.com/know-anyone-that-thinks-racial-profiling-is-exaggerated-watch-this-and-tell-me-when-your-jaw-drops-2?c=upw1>). What was done to the Native Americans and Africans to create and build this country still haunts us

today even if we don't want to acknowledge it. We, as a people of faith, are challenged to look at racism, poverty, and injustice as right to life issues. Just as we are adamant about fighting abortion, we must fight to make life just after the child is born. Being pro-life is a womb to the tomb issue. Is this not what Jesus wants of us? Pope Francis challenges us to be about what we preach and teach about. This is our time for us to practice our faith. God is speaking through these situations. Are we listening?



### **Church teachings on racism**

The Church has produced many documents over the past half-century in regards to racism. Here's a quick look at three of them:

- *Discrimination and the Christian Conscience* (1958) followed the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* calling for the desegregation of school systems and other instances of racial segregation at the time. The basic conclusion in this document was that Christians cannot support segregation because it's inconsistent with Christian views. In other words, we cannot treat the human person as "inferior." The problem with this document was that it made no specific recommendations in regards to action.
- In 1968 the bishops released a new statement on racism entitled *The National Race Crisis* in response to the mounting racial tensions of the Civil Rights Movement and the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- In 1979, the bishops released their next statement on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, which looked at how racism is a part of our personal lives and social and even church institutions. The document included recommendations for action.

And more still needs to be done to address issues of racism in the Church. As our bishops have stated, we need to move toward loving one another as humans and not demeaning one another based on what we look like or where we come from. (A recommended resource: Bryan Massingale's book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, which looks in detail at how our church's bishops have attempted to address the sin of racism over the past half-century.)

It is never easy to discuss or talk about racism. But everyone does talk about it within their own racial groups. It is something that affects us all, whether directly or indirectly. We, especially as a Catholic Church, need to be able to share our hurts and challenges. People that benefit from society's social structures and institutions may not see the necessity of addressing this issue, but as long as one part of the Body of Christ is affected, we all are. Only when we truly challenge the norms that may cause divisions (on both sides) will we be able to come together as the loving Church that we were created to be. We must put aside our stereotypes and fears and look at one another as brothers and sisters made in the image of God.

So what can, we as people of faith, do?

-Don't ignore what is going on: The silence by many leaders is speaking volumes. By not saying anything or not praying about it publicly is to make the impression that it is not a big deal. "We should not limit ourselves to deploring the negative effects of the present situation of crisis and injustice. What we are really required to do is destroy the roots that cause these effects." *World Day of Peace Message, 1995, Saint John Paul II*

-Admit that there is problem: These men did not deserve to die in the way that they did. The justice system is broken. In the case of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager was shot by police. That is unjust.

-Know that this is an issue that affects the WHOLE Body of Christ: For many, especially those who cannot relate to the victims of these deaths, this is just another news story. But for many others – especially those of us in the African American community – it is more than that. Michael Brown, and the other victims, are a too familiar story; a story that seems to repeat itself through history. In these men, we see a son, a husband, a father, a nephew, a youth ministry kid, and even me. As church folks, we need to reach out and LISTEN, HEAR, TRY TO UNDERSTAND (not theorize, judge, or assume), and MOURN with the community.

-Continue to express Christ's love to those who are suffering and bring his justice to those who are lost. It is time for us to Be church and not just Talk church. This is an opportunity for us to witness to non-believers to see how Christians step up in the face of unjust attacks.

Let me be clear. I know that the cops that did these hurtful acts only represent a handful of "bad apples" and not policemen (and women) everywhere. I know that there are many police out there that truly live out their motto to "protect and serve." I compare this to when some non-Catholics assumed all priests were pedophiles due to the actions of some. I have many friends that are cops and they risk their lives on the streets of New Orleans daily to uphold the law by working with, not threatening, the communities they serve.

So I close by asking the question again, DOES BLACK LIFE MATTER? It should because this is one of the Right to Life Issues our church should address.

***"...For it is in giving that we receive;  
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And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."  
-Prayer of St. Francis***

*Dr. Ansel Augustine is the Director of the Office of Black Catholic Ministries for the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Previously he served as the Associate Director/Coordinator of Black Youth & Young Adult Ministry for the CYO Youth & Young Adult Ministry Office. He is also on the Faculty of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University of Louisiana. Ansel has served on the board of directors for the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association (NCYAMA) and presently serves on the board of directors for the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM). Ansel has worked in ministry for over 15 years and has his Master's in Pastoral Studies from Loyola University's Institute for Ministry and his certificate in Youth Ministry from Xavier University's Institute for Black Catholic Studies. He began his career in ministry when he became the youth minister at his home parish of St. Peter Claver in the Treme area of New Orleans, which he helped to rebuild following hurricane Katrina. He has presented workshops and keynotes around the country and has written various pieces related to ministry. Ansel graduated from Loyola University of New Orleans with an undergraduate degree in Sociology, and his Masters in Pastoral Studies from Loyola's Institute for Ministry. He also received his Certificate in Youth Ministry from Xavier University of Louisiana's Institute for Black Catholic Studies. Ansel has completed his Doctorate in Ministry (D.Min).*