

COMMENTARY

By Rev. John R. Nakonachny

August 31, 2020

Over the many years that I have been working in the Ukrainian community, I have occasionally been moved to write a number of articles on various topics. However, never did I think that I would write an article about a paid advertisement that was printed in the Ukrainian Weekly.

After reading the advertisement entitled "Call to Action for Racial Justice in Ukrainian Diaspora Communities" from the Sunday, July 12, 2020 issue, I decided to voice my opinion on this topic.

First of all, I write this article in no other capacity but as a proud Ukrainian American whose grandparents arrived from Western Ukraine in 1902 – 118 years ago. They settled in Taylor, PA, a small town next to Scranton. My grandfathers were coal miners. My father served in the U.S. Army, stationed in Europe during World War II. We were proud Americans who hung the American flag from our front porch, as did all our neighbors.

We had no Blacks living in the town – they did not want to be miners - but every afternoon, the miners walked home from work – black as coal. The mine operators didn't provide showers. My grandfather, Alexander, died at the age of 50 from Black Lung disease – (cancer) that killed many miners. I was told that there were KKK members in our community. They burned crosses on the streets to show their dislike for Catholics and "Hunkies" (Slavic people).

My father told me the story about being on a train going to Florida for basic training and arguing with the conductor because he wouldn't allow my father to eat in a particular dining car because it was for "colored only". He was told, "Soldier, get out – you're down South now."

So, on reading the article that called us to contemplate "The Prejudices We Carry and Perpetuate" , I offer the following response. Understand that I carry no prejudices toward minorities and firmly believe that the vast majority of our Ukrainian community carry none either.

There is so much that could be written about the article. However, I will only comment on one paragraph, where the names of 5 individuals and the "long history of state and systemic violence against Black Lives" were mentioned.

The video of the killing of George Floyd by the police sickened all who watched, including hundreds of thousands of dedicated police officers. Those officers responsible will have their day in court and be punished if found guilty. However, too often we jump to conclusions before all the facts are known. Peaceful protests turn to mob rule with many innocent people suffering. People are killed and wounded, businesses are looted, damaged and burnt to the ground and families live in fear for their homes and neighborhoods. For many, mostly minorities, their lives are ruined forever.

I wish that the authors of the July 12th article would also have mentioned the names of David Doran, Patrick Underwood, Breann Leath, Waldis Jay Johnson, Julian Keen, Jr., the Black

police officers who were killed in the line of duty just in the last few months. Do these Black police lives matter? Will NFL players wear these names on their helmets?

I ask you to take a few minutes and look them up on your computer. You will see the pictures of these young heroes. Read about their wives, children and parents! Read how these heroes were shot while doing their jobs defending our safety and our cities.

I looked up the individuals mentioned in the article of July 12th. According to the news media, the Canadian, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, was an emotionally disturbed young woman. Her death was a tragedy - possibly a suicide and that she was not pushed from the 24th floor of her apartment building by the police, as her mother believed when she initially spoke to the press. But why wait for an investigation into her death? Her mother's words were enough for hundreds of people to rush to the streets of Toronto to protest. Why?? Because she was Black. Had she been white, I doubt that there would have been any mention of her death in the Toronto media.

The deaths of all those mentioned were a tragedy. Unfortunately, we seldom know the whole story behind the killings, especially immediately following the incidents. In an attempt to be the first to air / print a news story, the media focuses on the immediate situation, looking for the shock value. Taking a situation out of context and conjecture is so very dangerous.

We know that those who died all have families who mourn their loss. However, we should focus also on the horrific number of Blacks who are killed on our city streets every night.

In the Wednesday, August 19th issue of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, there was an article about a 17 year old Black boy whose family had fled to a Uganda Refugee Camp from the Congo. His name is Eric Hakizimana. Less than 2 years ago, under the sponsorship of Catholic Charities, he came to Cleveland with his parents and seven brothers and sisters. He sang in his church choir and played his keyboard drums at the church. He was driving down the street when a man shot him in the back while attempting to steal his car. Eric died. His friends set up a Go Fund Me account to collect money for his funeral. He was murdered on the same day that George Floyd died in Minneapolis. Outside of Cleveland, no one has heard of Eric and his untimely death.

Last week, an 8 year old Black girl, Makayla Pickett, was shot dead while attending her friend's birthday party in Akron and this week, a 14 year old Black boy, Denzyl Williams, was shot dead while playing basketball in a local park. No one demonstrated for their lives. A few people gathered at the site of their killings, lit a few candles, cried, placed flowers and stuffed animals, spoke a few words and left. None of them had a nationally televised 4-hour funeral, a golden casket pulled by white horses or sympathy messages from a former president and vice-president.

There was a moment of silence for George Floyd at the recent Democrat Convention. Did anyone even think of having a moment of silence for the thousands of innocent Black babies, children, teenagers and young adults killed and wounded every year on the streets of our cities?

Truly – do Black lives really matter?

How about the untold story of thousands of Black babies who are aborted every year? Planned Parenthood has its facilities especially located in minority neighborhoods. Why? To make more money. Listen to former Texas Planned Parenthood director, Abbey Johnson, tell her story as she spoke to the delegates at the Republican National Convention. Then there are those who are now pushing for taxpayer funded abortion all the way up to the 9th month, in some cases even infanticide. Even more Black babies will be killed.

Do the Black lives of the unborn matter? YES!! As believing Christians we must acknowledge that ALL lives matter. Remember that God made all of us in His Image. (Genesis 1:27)

The July 12th article calls us to "establish meaningful personal relationships with non-white neighbors". I wholeheartedly agree with that request and, with love, I interact with Black children and adults on a regular basis. With my love for gospel music, I have attended many inner city Black churches, often as the only white person in attendance. Annually I attend the February Black History Month school programs in an inner city school, often the only white person in the auditorium with the exception of some of the staff. I have chaperoned Black children on numerous school field trips. On one such trip to the zoo, I was holding the hand of a 7 year old Black boy and another boy walked up to me and asked, "Are you his daddy?" Just as I didn't look at his race, that boy didn't see mine. He was color blind to race. I enjoyed teaching our Black neighborhood children various Ukrainian phrases to shock Ukrainian visitors to our home. Until the pandemic, my wife volunteered to help children in a public school where only 5 out of 300 students are white. Together with my church, we support St. Herman Orthodox House of Hospitality in Cleveland, which houses homeless men and feeds the needy with 3 meals every day of the year. A large number of those being fed are African American.

I write these words in humility and for no other reason than to call everyone who signed the article to search out areas where they can do the same. Do not only put your name in small print and do nothing.

I support the article telling us that we should establish meaningful personal relationships with non-white neighbors.

However, in no way do I believe that "oppression is woven into the very fabric of the modern United States". I once heard on the news that in the 1960's, only 25% of the population of the United States approved of interracial marriages. Today, over 80% approve. Watch the TV commercials. You will see mixed race families – husband, wife and children – advertising a particular product. Five years ago, you would never have seen such a commercial – it would have been business suicide. Watch television news and you will see large numbers of young Black announcers and commentators.

Ask yourself – "What do they all have in common?" They are all highly educated in their chosen professions. America holds no one back from improving themselves. Sure, there will be obstacles in their way and it will not be easy but it is not because of racism. Please look up the life of Dr. Ben Carson, renowned neurosurgeon and now Secretary of Housing and Urban Development on Wikipedia. If he could succeed, anyone who has the desire can succeed also. America is still the land of opportunity.

According to the U.S. Census, the Black population is a little over 13% of the American population, yet President Obama was elected with over 51% of the vote – Twice! How is this possible if we are a racist country? Why do so many immigrants want to flee Africa for the U.S.? ? Ask a Cuban in Miami why he left Cuba - only 90 miles away from his homeland. Why do so many people cross the Mexican border illegally to enter the United States, including Ukrainians? Our own people have spent thousands of dollars in legal fees to prevent being deported for overstaying their visas. When immigrants come to this country, do they then see all the "oppression" and choose to return to the country of their origin?

We live in a free country - but do we really when discussing this issue? Ask Fr. Daniel Moloney, a former Catholic Chaplain at M.I.T. He told the truth about George Floyd in a sincere pastoral manner and was fired that evening. How often do we hear true opinions expressed on various topics, only to have an apology issued the next day for their "insensitivity"? In most cases, the individuals expressing those opinions (and apologies) are fired anyway. When you can't refute the facts and the message, just fire the messenger. Remember St. John the Baptist. He was beheaded for telling the truth. Sadly, the "silent majority" has now become the "silenced majority."

Now, in my interactions with African Americans, I ask them directly if they think that America is a racist country. Not one has told me that they believe it is. Certainly, they say, there are people who they believe are racist and who have done and said cruel things to them but that is not the majority of Americans, only a small number of people who we should pray for and avoid.

Personally, in working with the Ukrainian community for almost 50 years, I have come across my own people who, at times, have been very cruel to me, spreading untruths, but I don't blame all Ukrainians for other peoples' ignorance. I pray for them and try to stay away from them – far away!

One question on my mind is "How could so many Ukrainians attach their names to a dangerous ideology, like the Black Lives Matter movement when most of the protests are followed every night with burning and looting and chanting "Death to America! Kill the cops!"? Burn our Flag and deface and burn our churches and monuments! Have we forgotten how America welcomed immigrants from Ukraine, especially the post-World War II immigrants from the Soviet Union, which was responsible for the death of millions of our ancestors?

In 1970, when I was a student at the University of Manitoba, I heard former Vice President Hubert Humphrey speak to a gathering of the Liberal Party in Winnipeg. He said, "The United States is not a perfect country but it is the most perfect one on earth!" This is still true today.

I hope that my words help you to understand that America is not a racist country but, at the same time, America is a sick country. We are spiritually sick. We have departed from the Judeo-Christian roots of our ancestors, who made it great. God was always first in their lives. Just look at the Ukrainian churches in our communities that were built by our parents and grandparents as a Testimony to their Love of God. The golden domes add much beauty to our cities. They are especially visible in Parma. But where are our children – our youth – today?

There are many reasons for this sad development but I believe that it began in the 1960's, when God and prayer were taken out of our public schools by Supreme Court decisions. Then things continued to get worse. Nativity scenes and Christmas carols were outlawed in the name of the First Amendment. A simple prayer at public school graduation ceremonies, asking God to bless the graduates is considered "against the Constitution". Even a tiny cross that stood for 75 years in a California desert honoring the war dead that no one could see, was attacked. Really?!

The enemies of religion are still alive and doing all they can to destroy the moral fiber of our nation and they are succeeding. Just ask any of the protestors / rioters if they know that they are breaking the Ten Commandments. They are likely to ask you, "Ten What?", before attacking the questioner. They are empty souls with no moral compass to guide them. I firmly believe that a major reason for this is the absence of God in society. We have failed our youth!

The Laws of God – God’s Ten Commandments - that are carved into the stone on top of the Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC cannot be taught in public schools to the children of our Nation. In many areas, nine justices make decisions that I believe the majority of our citizens oppose. Twenty three states requested the Supreme Court to permit a generic prayer at the beginning of the school day, asking God to bless parents, teachers, students and country but it was declared unconstitutional. Yet Congress opens every session with a prayer and I delivered such a prayer during Captive Nations week on Tuesday, July 18, 1978.

Let us remember that all political leaders – past and present – have flaws. Every candidate comes with baggage. Remember the words in an Orthodox memorial service: *"For there has never been a man (person) who has not sinned"* (Ecclesiastes 7:20) and *"Let him who is without sin throw the first stone"* (St. John 8:7). President Obama once said that "elections have consequences." With that statement always in my mind, I vote for a candidate’s ideology, beliefs, and doctrines, not their temperament. Temperament can be easily voted out at a future election. Ideology can do lasting damage for generations to come.

So often we hear politicians and speakers end their speech with "God Bless America". But do we really want Him in our Nation when, during the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, the words "under God" are removed, as was done at a recent political convention? Is our motto "In God we trust" going to be the next phrase to be removed?

We should always remember the words of former president Ronald Reagan, spoken to the Ecumenical National Prayer Breakfast in Dallas, Texas on August 23, 1984 (see YouTube video):

"Without God, democracy will not and cannot endure. If we ever forget that we are one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under."

I know that, if we humble ourselves, God will bless America, but not before America blesses God first.