



Dear Members of the Xavier University Community:

Not quite four months after I became Xavier's president, Timothy Thomas became only the most recent in a long line of black men to die at the hands of Cincinnati police officers. The city soon exploded in grief and anger and unrest, and a curfew was declared. And now, as I prepare to enter into my final year as Xavier's president more than 19 years later: another death of a black man at the hands of police (although this time in Minneapolis), more exploding unrest in Cincinnati and elsewhere and yet another curfew. A long, dark line connects these two events separated by 19 years, a line written in the blood of black bodies, dead at the hands of officers and others. The most recent names on that line before George Floyd's were those of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. And stretching back before Timothy Thomas, in 2001—how many exactly? Who and when? For that line extends through the mass incarceration of today to the heyday of lynching to the chattel slave system of the antebellum United States whose legacy our country has yet to outgrow. Seems in fact—too often—to be unwilling to outgrow.

How to respond to these recent events, but to the death of George Floyd most especially? Anger and outrage? To be sure. How can we not? But if you are like me (sadly, I must say it), not with surprise. I should be angered and outraged that I am no longer surprised, and at one level I am. But at another I am just deeply, deeply sad.

Another response of ours of course must be to the civil unrest that has spun so out of control in so many places. Here we must be careful. For on the one hand we see boiling out long pent-up outrage; we must listen to and learn from it although that outrage itself does great violence wrongly and we are right to call that out. But worse: Some hijack the grief of others for their own dark purposes, destroying the work and livelihoods of those they claim to stand with and protect. Their behaviors deserve our full-throated condemnation if for no other reason (and there are many other reasons) than what they do allows others to change the subject and not talk about the deeply ingrained, systemic structures of racism that riddle our society, and to talk instead about "the looters." Just as they changed the subject when Colin Kaepernick took a knee during our National Anthem to protest what we just saw happen again last week in Minneapolis, and his constitutionally protected act of symbolic speech was derided as an insult to our flag and our people in service. Would George Floyd have died, do you think, if we had listened differently to Colin Kaepernick? As well, our police forces and other agencies charged with keeping order must take great care always that their actions never escalate already great tensions.

One additional response might be, indeed must be, to realize that whatever we have been doing to address this original sin of our country, it has not been enough. Campus dialogues following the civil unrest of 2001 led to much, and chief among what it led to was a broad institutional pivot into being a part of our Cincinnati community in a way Xavier had never been before, especially with and for the marginalized. More recently, I am proud of the work we have been doing since Dr. Janice Walker became our Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, especially as that work has been creatively extended and multiplied through the efforts of Dr. Kyra Shahid, the Director of the CDI (Center for Diversity and

Inclusion). Our grappling with our own University's tangled early history with institutional slavery has led to much since Dr. Walker Gollar helped bring it to light several years ago. The Working Group on Xavier's Connection to Slavery, shaped in response to Dr. Gollar's work, has served us well in many ways, from last fall's Universities Studying Slavery symposium to the work that artist-in-residence Angela Franklin is currently completing that will soon grace our Conaton Board Room. And these are only several of the long, long list of initiatives that Dr. Walker has overseen in her work on the strategic plan for institutional diversity and inclusion she put together several years ago (with the assistance of many of you) and is now bringing to fruit (again, with your good assistance). I would like finally to mention under this heading that three distinguished scholars will be joining us this coming fall as full members of a new department that will house Sociology and our Gender and Diversity Studies program: Drs. ShaDawn Battle, Mich Yonah Nyawalo and Kayla Wheeler. Their coming to us at this particular time feels to me like providence.

But whatever we have done until now must be acknowledged by all in light of present events as the early steps of a long journey. And so I recommend to us all the various campus resources which Drs. Walker and Shahid are reminding us of elsewhere in *Today at Xavier*. I call our attention as well to opportunities for our students to gather, which you can learn more about [here](#). Important as our own efforts must be to open our eyes more fully to the implicit biases which stain us all, that we might better harness whatever privilege we enjoy on behalf of those not privileged in the ways we are, that much more important must our efforts be for our students whose educations will someday make possible the birth of the just society toward which we lean in hope, but whose full coming we will not, I fear, live to see ourselves.

A concluding reflection on the day I write these words. As a Catholic priest, I mark Pentecost Sunday today with other Christians. We regard it as the birthday of the Christian Church. Perhaps you know its story: A mighty wind seized a house, and the timid and confused followers of Jesus were transformed by the Spirit's fire into mighty disciples who stopped at nothing, not even their own deaths, to spread the Good News they had been given. The Greek word we translate as "Spirit"—pneuma—is likewise the word that means "breath." The juxtaposition today is haunting. In the Gospel reading proper to today's feast in my tradition, Jesus gives his spirit to his disciples by breathing on them. But George Floyd couldn't breathe. And so we recognize the birth of the Christian Church once again this year at this very moment. Whoever we are and whatever tradition we follow, let us all redouble our efforts at building a world of justice, of love, of mercy and of peace. A world where God's children, one and all, may freely and deeply breathe.

Fr. Michael Graham, S.J.  
President  
Xavier University