

Ferguson:

Healing Amid Heartbreak



Catholics began helping right after the shooting and continue to serve, with Jesus' words as their guide



Within hours of the shooting on that hot Saturday afternoon in August, Sr. Cathy Doherty, SSND, understood the magnitude of the death of Michael Brown. A shooting death, any death, yields an aftermath and an implicit call for healing; but this was something bigger.

As she greeted parishioners at the 5 PM Mass at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, the Guadalupe pastoral associate learned not only the basic news of the event but a detail that foreshadowed the strife and unrest that lay ahead: The street where Brown was killed was still closed five hours after the shooting.

“That’s when I realized it wasn’t ‘just’ a shooting death,” Sr. Doherty said. “There was a difference in this one.”

In this one, which took place a couple of miles from Our Lady of Guadalupe, a white Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson, shot and killed Brown, 18, an unarmed African American Ferguson resident.

Brown’s body lay in the street for more than four hours because, with gunfire in the area, police were concerned about the safety of the men removing the body. The delay helped fuel the subsequent unrest.

Race and a shooting death proved a volatile mix. Violence erupted—both in the immediate aftermath and three months later when a grand jury determined Wilson wouldn’t be indicted.

In total, rioters torched nearly two dozen businesses, broke windows in about fifty others, and looted them all. People lost their livelihoods, their life’s work ruined, while surviving businesses suffered due to fewer customers.



A memorial near the site where Michael Brown was shot [August 30, 2014]

Schools were closed, and children wondered why Mommy and Daddy were so frightened.

Through the chaos, the Catholic Church has been present in Ferguson—following closely the admonition of Pope Francis: “To love God and neighbor is not something abstract, but profoundly concrete: it means seeing in every person the face of the Lord to be served, to serve him concretely.” From the spiritual aspect of prayer to the tangible works of Catholic charity, the Church has worked to bring healing to the area.

Prayerful Presence

Sr. Doherty and Fr. Robert “Rosy” Rosebrough, the pastor of neighboring Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish, have been at the forefront of the Catholic prayerful response to the unrest that has become known simply as “Ferguson.” Our Lady of Guadalupe and Blessed Teresa form a triangle with the memorial site for Brown.

Sr. Doherty tried to make sense of the shooting and the anger and violence that enveloped Ferguson in the days that followed. Stories of what happened were vastly different.

Some saw Michael Brown’s death as something like an execution, with a police officer shooting a young man who they believed had his hands raised in surrender—thus the chant at some marches: “Hands Up. Don’t shoot.”

Others saw the shooting as justified, citing some witness reports that the young man attacked the officer through the patrol car window and then charged the officer.

In the first few days, especially, forensic evidence was sparse and ambiguous enough to support many interpretations.

In the immediate aftermath of Brown’s death, Sr. Doherty searched for answers. “I was trying find out facts: What was different? Why did this shooting make a difference?” she said. “Everything these people were saying...it didn’t make sense, so I was trying to find out more facts about what was going on.”

Then she got scared. Two days after Brown’s death, offi-



What remains of Prime Beauty Supply in Ferguson—a result of riots that followed the St. Louis County grand jury’s decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson. [November 25, 2014]

cialists set an 8 PM curfew. It continued for weeks, varying between 10 PM and midnight. “It was scary,” she said. “I’ve been here twenty-three years, and I had never been on curfew in this neighborhood.”

As the story spread beyond St. Louis and became international news, the quarter-mile stretch of West Florissant Avenue (about a third of a mile from the shooting site) became what some people called a “war zone.” On August 10, the day after Brown died, police responded to people looting and breaking windows with a SWAT team, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Some protesters, political leaders and other observers said the police response was exaggerated. In fact, that scale of the response has ignited a national discussion on police use of surplus military hardware.

Media from throughout the world descended into Ferguson, police took over a nearby shopping center for a command post, and Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon called out the National Guard. The unrest lasted two weeks.

The day following the eruption, Fr. Rosebrough walked through the area and prayed, quietly stopping to offer a blessing at the site of a QuikTrip that had been gutted by fire. That night, he led a rosary service at the Blessed Teresa of Calcutta grotto, a service suggested by parishioners and pastoral associate Jeanne Baer.

“That was the first response; they heard the heart of the people and they initiated it,” Fr. Rosebrough said. “Then, all of a sudden, it became very fitting; it became more than

“We want to pray that there is healing but also remember that we can’t return to the status quo because things will never ever be the same.”

**—St. Louis Archbishop
Robert J. Carlson**

just us. It mushroomed.” Catholics and other Christians were reminded of Jesus’ command to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39), which Pope Benedict XVI reinforced in a Christmas Day encyclical in 2005: “Closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.”

Sr. Doherty invited Auxiliary Bishop Edward M. Rice to celebrate Mass at Guadalupe’s Hispanic Festival, which went off as scheduled

Confronting a Culture of Violence: A Catholic Framework for Action

An excerpt from *A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1994*

In this task, the Catholic community has much at stake and much to contribute. What we believe, where we are, and how we live out our faith can make a great difference in the struggle against violence....Our assets in this challenge include:

- † the example and teaching of Jesus Christ;
- † the biblical values of respect for life, peace, justice, and community;
- † our teaching on human life and human dignity, on right and wrong, on family and work, on justice and peace, on rights and responsibilities;
- † our tradition of prayer, sacraments, and contemplation which can lead to a disarmament of the heart;
- † a commitment to marriage and family life to support responsible parenthood and to help parents in providing their children the values to live full lives;
- † a presence in most neighborhoods —our parishes and schools, hospitals and social services are sources of life and hope in places of violence and fear;
- † an ethical framework which calls us to practice and promote virtue, responsibility, forgiveness, generosity, concern for others, social justice and economic fairness.



St. Louis Archbishop Robert J. Carlson greets attendees at Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish after a prayer service following the grand-jury decision. [November 24, 2014 © CNS Jim Young, Reuters]



A group prays at the site of a destroyed QuikTrip in Ferguson after the name of the officer who shot Michael Brown was released. [August 15, 2014]

The works of Catholic Charities throughout St. Louis continue with additional resources. Catholic Family Services provides counselors for schoolchildren at Guadalupe and Blessed Teresa. Counseling offers students the opportunity to express themselves without fear of repercussions. The

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—Pope Francis

healing process can be assisted by a person’s opportunity to tell his or her story in a safe environment. As people relay their stories over and over, they take on current experiences and slowly begin to change and be reshaped. That helps the individual to remember the events in a new way. The new ending may be positive despite the original negativity.



About 1,000 activists protested for a second day throughout Manhattan following the St. Louis County grand jury’s decision. [November 25, 2014]



Fr. Robert Rosebrough, pastor of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta Parish, prays at the site of the death of Michael Brown. [August 16, 2014 © CNS Lisa Johnston, St. Louis Review]

on Sunday, August 17, even though some vendors were wary and one refused to go into Ferguson. In addition, Fr. Rosebrough wrote a letter to Archbishop Robert J. Carlson detailing the gravity of the situation in Ferguson. Archbishop Carlson visited on August 18. Both Bishop Rice and Archbishop Carlson quietly went to the shooting site and offered prayers, including a prayer for eternal rest for Brown. On his visit, Bishop Rice walked among protesters.

“You can tell the people are hurting; you can just sense it as you walk through,” Bishop Rice said that day. “You hear them crying out for justice and peace. It’s devastating for them. It’s almost like it broke the heart of the community.”

Sr. Doherty was struck by the scene they encountered. “When we got out at the QuikTrip, there was a sea of rose petals that we walked on, and people were holding roses,” she said. “I was really afraid to go over there because of everything I had seen on TV, but when I saw roses, I told the bishop, ‘This is going to be OK; we’ll be fine.’”

“Those roses spoke of peace and truth, and the truth is what I kept believing would come out.”

Prayer continued for the repose of Brown’s soul and for his family and friends, and for Wilson and his family and friends. And the ministering included the work of Catholic police chaplains, including Fr. Mike Boehm, Fr. Joe Weber and Fr. John Patrick Day.

Fr. Rosebrough headed the rosary service each Monday until near the end of October, and he also organized an ecumenical prayer procession. And when violence erupted after the announcement of the grand-jury decision on November 24, the Catholic community responded once again with prayer.

Fr. Rosebrough, along with Archbishop Carlson, led a prayer service at Blessed Teresa Calcutta. Meanwhile, the newly established LifeTeen group debuted with a night of prayer headed by Catholic musicians Ike Ndolo and Emily Wilson.

Sr. Doherty, along with Bishop Rice, organized a monthly Archdiocese Faith in Ferguson rosary and prayer service. Archbishop Carlson celebrated two Masses for peace and justice, the first a couple weeks after the shooting. The second was held the day before Thanksgiving after another round of violence was erupting in response to the grand jury’s decision. The decision came after three months of examining forensics and listening to conflicting witness testimony.

The Catholic response to the strife and unrest in Ferguson has been and continues to be strong. How can we reply to similar calls to action in our communities? “We need to turn to the Lord and ask God, with the power that he can bring to any situation, to bring about healing,” Archbishop Carlson said in impromptu remarks at the November 5 Faith in Ferguson service. “We want to pray that there is healing but also remember that we can’t return to the status quo because things will never ever be the same. We also have to begin to deal with those issues that bring us here today. Praying day in and day out is a must,” Archbishop Carlson added.



The Future

Now that the media trucks, cameras, and national figures have left Ferguson, the real work in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s death has commenced—addressing issues of systemic racism, as Archbishop Carlson has said, that lurk below the surface.

Archbishop Carlson has reinstated the archdiocese’s Human Rights Commission and called on Lwanga Center (a ministry of the Archdiocese of St. Louis) to study violence in the home and elsewhere and come up with solutions. There is wisdom in determining the “why” that helps to identify the imposing injustice, an imperative part of the healing process. Healing can’t begin until the injustice is stopped.



An individual expresses her opinion in Toronto over events in Ferguson. [November 25, 2014]

Catholics in the St. Louis area have been generous in donating money and food to area parishes, and many have come to Ferguson to paint the plywood of boarded-up businesses, creating art out of violence. This coming together exhibits an example of respect for human dignity and the basic needs of human beings. This confirms that the community doesn't stand alone and reflects Romans 12:12: "Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer." The art serves to memorialize the event, allowing people to remember the event and learn from and not repeat the past.

All of this is good, but Fr. Rosebrough and Sr. Doherty constantly remind others that this isn't just a Ferguson problem. "It's everywhere," said Fr. Rosebrough, who surprised his barber when he responded to the barber's wish that the protesters move on by saying: "I hope they don't; I hope they stay here as a reminder."

Fr. Rosebrough tells a story of a parishioner, a retired woman whom he describes as "feisty," speaking with a protester in her neighborhood. "There were 200 to 250 people, and some people were calling her names," he said. "She said, 'What's going on. Why don't you come over and talk to me?' She was small in stature but wasn't deterred when a big guy with a mask approached her. She said, 'Not with that mask on your face.'"

"He said his piece, and she said

hers, and they gave each other a hug after it was over. Those kinds of dialogues are happening....That is the work needed for cultural change."

Those open dialogues, along with prayer, the capacity to recognize and stop the injustice, the option to relay one's story within a safe environment, and the opportunity to memorialize the event are all key pieces in the work

toward healing—pieces that can be applied to any form of conflict—in Ferguson and beyond.

The 1994 Pastoral Message of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said: "Our families are torn by violence. Our communities are destroyed by violence. Our faith is tested by violence. We have an obligation to respond." ●

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