

Statement of the Council of Bishops Ukrainian Orthodox
Church of the USA:

**IS OUR NATION AT THE THRESHOLD
OF CHANGE?**

TO: *The beloved Clergy and Faithful of our Holy Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA*

RE: *“God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”*

Dearly beloved Brothers and Sisters in our Lord,

CHRIST IS AMONGST US! IS AND ALWAYS SHALL BE!

This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. (Deuteronomy 30:19)

The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast. He will die for lack of discipline, led astray by his own great folly. (Proverbs 5:22-23)

As your hierarchs, we have agonized over all that we have witnessed during the past two weeks since the death by asphyxiation of George Floyd at the actions of a police officer, the details and video of which have been repeatedly broadcasted by mass media throughout the entire world. Our initial reaction to this horrific and unjustifiable death was abject outrage and we considered an immediate response that would have been in agreement with so many other responses, but without consideration of the profound consequences resulting from that death.

We categorically state for all to know that we consider Mr. Floyd’s death completely unjustifiable, regardless of the alleged crime for which the police stopped him and most certainly regardless of his previous history with the law. No man should ever be subjected to such a slow and agonizing death with a knee to his throat, begging to be allowed to breathe and still being held so long after he became silent and had no pulse. This was just as horrific as anything we have learned about from the history of our own people at the hands of the Soviet regime in the torture and mass murder of the people of Ukraine for over seven decades. Racial attacks or discrimination under any circumstances is an abomination before God. The scene of a white knee on a black neck is horrifying and so very reminiscent of images seen all too often even into the 1960’s of the twentieth century – a hundred years after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation – when lynching took place without consequence. In the video exhibiting in full the death of George Floyd, the white police officer often stared directly into the camera recording his actions with his hands in his pockets and yet, he still refused – even

at the urging of fellow officers – to lift his knee. Is that because he simply thought he could get away with it unscathed?

Unfortunately, Mr. Floyd's death in such a manner is not an isolated example of increased brutality on the part of those who are supposed to serve and protect all the citizens of their cities, towns and villages across our nation. We are deeply concerned about the continued militarization of our nation's police forces. This militarization seems to have transformed many of those forces into something foreign to what they are supposed to be – peacemakers serving with the goal of turning radically dangerous and threatening situations into a shared vision of calm during the resolution of the problem at hand. Militarized, these forces seem to have abandoned the necessity of “wasting” hours or days of negotiation toward resolution rather than death and destruction, with individual members of those agencies acting in a rogue fashion. As the result, we have the consequences of the murder of George Floyd appearing before, us day and night, on all forms of mass media. Fortunately, this may prove to be beneficial for the world.

In spite, however, of what “seems” to be fact, the vast majority of police officers still comprehend their responsibility as peacemakers. It is the small minority that we are confronted with almost daily in the news. There are no “big” headlines broadcasted, or given sustained coverage relating the positive consequences, when police officers slowly and sometimes painfully bring to a successful conclusion a life-threatening situation. We normally see no mass demonstrations in support of the good that the majority of police officers accomplish for society. We must recognize, however, that following the death of Mr. Floyd, the many recent positive actions and support given by police officers in all aspects of life under their jurisdiction have been somewhat highlighted, even if it is presented only as a human-interest story.

We cannot ignore here the muted response we see in society, beyond perhaps a few hours or days, to the attacks upon and the death of police officers at the hands of those they attempt to arrest or control in dangerous situations. We seldom see massive demonstrations protesting these deaths with the goals of change or reform. There seems to be an attitude of “this happens in the line of duty”. Our nation's system of law and order is expected to prohibit such deaths. Unfortunately, however, those laws and the courts have concentrated on imprisonment creating an extremely overcrowded prison system with more inmates than any other country in the world. Upon leaving prison, these inmates have experienced no real reformation and they have not learned how to cope with life and all its frustrations.

Adding to all this, we are confronted with undeniable racism on the part of some police officers in dealing with black citizens and other people of color. Ours is not to determine whether this racism is systematic throughout all levels of these police forces, but in many instances, this has proven to be true. This will be revealed over time as the aftermath of Mr. Floyd's death and those of many other race related deaths. Our prayer is that Mr. Floyd's death and those others will finally open the eyes of all to the need for change and not just political nods of the head, hoping to get through an upcoming election. If the call of so many demonstrations – in which tens of thousands of people of many races participate – are ignored, we fear for the future of our nation. George Floyd did not want

to become a martyr. George Floyd did not want to have his life end so senselessly. Through it, however, his loss may prove to be an influential factor in the improvement of our life, perhaps bringing more unity to our nation.

Every single American citizen has the right to demonstrate and protest given by the First Amendment of the Constitution. Any government agency or individual that attempts to deny that right or to attack it, must cease or be stopped immediately. Peaceful demonstrations and protests have been the bedrock of our self-identity as citizens of the USA – all the way from one of the original protest demonstrations – the Boston Tea Party – the first widely acclaimed action leading to the Declaration of Independence. We can trace through our history to see how such peaceful protests have accomplished real change in our political, legal and social life. Thus, we cannot be more adamant in expressing the rights of all citizens to demonstrate and protest, whatever the reason behind it.

When demonstrations and protests become something other than peaceful, however, there can be little hope for any positive consequences. Some ascribed the violence we have witnessed at the beginning of the present-day demonstrations to anarchists, to gangs, to racist agitators, to foreign governments, among others. Regardless of how the violence initiated, it is wrong and self-defeating. It only distracts from and destroys the integrity of those demonstrating peacefully and properly in the effort to bring about change. Violence, riots and property damage serve only to reinforce racial bias and distrust and to undermine the authority of the police and other agencies charged with maintaining law and order. Violence, riots and property damage kill the hopes of the majority about the real possibility of change and reform – not only of the system – but also of individual human beings and societal psychology or mental processes – our mental and emotional make-up.

The whole of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ's teaching encompasses the sanctity of life from the moment of conception to natural death. We have no way around this message. We cannot adapt the message to our "changing societal norms". We cannot look into the eyes of any other human being, thinking that he or she is somewhat different or less than we are – for any reason. We cannot ignore that he or she is made also in the "image and likeness of God". We cannot ignore the commandment that we are to love him or her as we love ourselves – made in the image and likeness of God. His or her soul is filled with the same light and love of God as is ours. Anything – ANYTHING – that casts doubt in our hearts, minds and souls about this is pure evil. We cannot ignore, each of us, what our own personal attitude has been toward racism. Are we able to sympathize with those of a different color as fellow human beings? Or do we simply turn a deaf ear and wear blinders to block our peripheral vision so as to avoid seeing that which makes us uncomfortable? Are we unconsciously biased, perhaps to protect whatever our self-perceived position of privilege may be? Is ours the attitude of the Pharisees talking to God about how good they are, how they contribute to worthy causes and thanking Him that they are not like the Publican standing behind them in humility before the same God?

We have celebrated the DAY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. If we truly consider ourselves to be God's children, we must allow that Holy Spirit to work in and through us so that we

can reflect the IMAGE OF GOD into the world and the lives around us. We must begin, each of us, an honest interior reflection about whether or not our psychological make-up enables us to live with our own perhaps unconscious versions of discrimination or bias toward any other human being. We must determine whether or not in our own minds, we contribute to society's inequality by our silence or unwillingness to become involved. Unless we are willing to do so, we fight a losing battle and may even become part of the problem. What we witness today in the response to the death of George Floyd – at all levels of society – social, political, legal, etc., may just be the threshold of one of the defining moments of history for us all and even for the world. And so, we pray:

“O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, everywhere present and filling all things. Treasury of blessings and Giver of Life come and dwell in us and cleanse us from every impurity – and save our souls O Good One.” Help us, O Comforter, to open ourselves up to the Grace You have inspired into us through all the Holy Mysteries, Grace that will enable us to live with pure love for all.

+*Antony, Metropolitan*

+*Daniel, Archbishop*