

# “I Can’t Breathe”

*A Reflection and Resource for Dialogue*

*In memory of Mr. George Floyd*

*JPIC Department Atlantic-Midwest Province, School Sisters of Notre Dame*

On Monday, May 25, 2020, George Floyd (46) was murdered by police, who suspected him of trying to pass a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. A bystander’s video shows an arresting officer kneeling on Floyd’s neck, while Floyd—handcuffed and prostrate on the ground—begged for relief. “I can’t breathe,” he said. After enduring nearly nine minutes of this trauma, Floyd was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead.

This scene is shocking, and yet, it is not unusual. You see, George Floyd was black, and black people have been subjected to state-sanctioned brutality for centuries. Floyd’s murder is sadly similar to the police killing of Eric Garner in 2014, who was unable to breathe while in police custody, but it bears the echoes of black men and women who have experienced the torture of slavery, lynchings, and excessive aggression by police. Floyd became the third of a series of high profile murder victims this spring alone who were killed because their killers sensed danger in their skin tones. Ahmaud Arbery, who was murdered while going for a jog, and Breonna Taylor, who was murdered by police who raided her home by mistake.



Unfortunately, these high profile killings are not the only black lives lost this month. The Covid-19 pandemic has had an extremely disproportionate impact on black communities, as well. In fact, African-Americans account for approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population, but [represent](#) almost one-third of U.S. deaths from the pandemic. While we cannot prosecute anyone for these lives lost, it is clear that systemic injustices that have been perpetrated against black people in this country make black communities extremely vulnerable to this virus and other public health crises. If we hope to recover from this crisis, we must address these injustices, including unjust policing and racially biased courts.

We must critically consider how white privilege contributes to racism and take steps to acknowledge and dismantle the impact of race-based privilege. We stand against the racist structures of our social systems, and demand justice for all, demonstrating with words and actions that indeed, black lives matter to us.

**Take a moment to reflect:** Keedron Bryant age 12, composed this prayer/lament following the death of George Floyd. [Click here](#)

**For conversation and group discussion:** Understanding how white privilege intersects with the perpetuation of racism is critical to the work of dismantling racism. We invite you to use this article on White Privilege by Fr. Bryan Massengale of Fordham University. [Click here](#). The questions below are suggested conversation starters,

**Suggested questions for conversation:**

- What insights and/or questions has the article evoked in you?
- What are some steps that you/we can take in order to continue our work of dismantling racism?

**Closing Prayer: *Prayer of Breath***

In solidarity with George Floyd and all people of color who “can’t breathe,”

Take a few breaths and as you [inhale](#) slowly pray, “Come Holy Spirit.”

As you [exhale](#), be mindful of the power of the Holy Spirit to renew the face of the earth.

**Conclusion:** Offer one another a sign of peace

**Below Are Additional Resources:**

The Article” [For Our White Friends Desiring To Be Allies](#)” by Courtney Ariel

The article “[75 Things White People Can Do for Racial Justice](#),” by Corinne Shutack, offers some practical suggestions for how to stand with people of color. Here are some examples:

- For those Involved in Education:
  - Buy or donate books that feature people of color as protagonists and heroes. A few good lists are [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And/or purchase educational toys that feature people of color, such as [finger puppets](#), [Black History Flashcards](#), etc. for their classroom. Use these items year-round, not just in February
  - Find out how slavery, the Civil War, and the Jim Crow era are being taught in your local school. There are a lot of great resources out there with a little googling, like [PBS’s resources for teaching slavery](#), [this POC Online Classroom blog](#), [Teaching for Change](#), and [The National Association for Multicultural Education](#).

Support black businesses and restaurants. Find them on [Eat Okra](#), [WeBuyBlack](#), [The Black Wallet](#), and [Official Black Wall Street](#). Don’t buy from companies that use prison labor. Find a good list [here](#).

- Join your local Showing up for Racial Justice (SURJ) group. There is a lot of awesome work going on locally — get involved in the projects that speak to you.
- Listen without ego and defensiveness to people of color. Truly listen.
  - Videos to watch and discuss:
    - 13<sup>th</sup> and The House I Live In
  - Books and articles to read and discuss:
    - The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander; Caught by Marie Gottschalk; Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates; A People’s History of the United States by Howard Zinn; Orange is the New Black; The Color of Law. Get your friends on board reading it, too; Nikole Hannah-Jones’ [The 1619 Project](#).
- Recognize that in the same way saying “slavery is a necessary evil” (Thomas Jefferson’s words) was acceptable by many in 1820, the same way saying “separate but equal” was acceptable by many in 1940, choosing to not condemn white nationalism, the fact that [black people are 2.7 times as likely to be killed by police than white people](#), the fact that [unarmed black Americans are roughly five times as likely as unarmed white Americans to be shot and killed by a police officer](#), that the fact [the black imprisonment rate for drug offenses is about 5.8 times higher than it is for whites](#), etc are acts of overt racism in 2020.
- Google whether your local police department currently outfits all on-duty police officers with a body-worn camera and requires that the body-worn camera be turned on immediately when officers respond to a police call; google whether your city or town currently employs evidence-based police de-escalation trainings.
  - If they don’t, write to your city or town government representative and police chief to advocate for it. Multiply your voice by soliciting others to advocate as well, writing on social media about it, writing op-eds, etc.

