



2 June 2020

Dear Alumni, Parents, Past Parents, Colleagues and Students,

I've never had a problem with finding the words. A statement would be all too easy. It's almost a formula. Decry systemic racism, lament violence of all sorts, show concern for minority students, support freedom of expression, mix in a quote or two from the Catholic Bishops, documents of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, maybe even the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That's a statement. Done. Check that box. La Salle's status as a "woke" institution is assured.

Statements are easy. **Understanding is what's hard.** You can write a passable statement in 45 minutes if you set your mind to it, and the phone doesn't ring. Understanding takes time. The better part of a lifetime, probably. I've been stopped by a cop more than a few times. My reaction? It never went beyond a pithy "Oh, fuddle duddle," as the first Prime Minister Trudeau once famously euphemized. I usually know after the first minute of that encounter whether I'm shortly to become a lot poorer, but I've never been afraid. Not for a moment. I just don't understand the experience of a young African American male in this context. Members of the police force have been a steady and helpful support on the handful of occasions when I've asked them for help. It's hard for me to understand an experience so radically different.

I've had a hard time breathing from time-to-time recently. It's basically been because the material used to make a mask or two in my growing collection was a bit too heavy. It's never been because another human being chose to use his power to cut off my life's breath, as happened to George Floyd a week ago, over nine horrible minutes. I've met some cold and indifferent people, but I've never had someone reject my repeated cries for mercy. Should truth be told, I've never had to cry for mercy. Not even close.

I've never owned a business, either. I care about La Salle the way other people care about their businesses, but I'd never be so presumptuous as to say I "own" the place. I don't know what it's like to pour your heart and soul into a venture for years, enjoy prosperity, hang on with difficulty through the COVID-19 pandemic, only to have random strangers throw a trash can through my window, capriciously loot the inventory I'd painstakingly chosen and assembled, then set the place ablaze; all that remains of my life's work, the way I support my family, reduced to rubbish on the curb.

Even the smaller scenes in our national tragedy are outside my understanding. I've never run from tear gas, pepper spray, or an enraged truck driver, never had someone throw stones, or Molotov cocktails, or bottles of urine at me while I'm doing the job I'm sworn to do. I can't understand how someone can prefer jingoistic bravado to reasoned discourse as a way out of this impasse or how someone can torch a business that makes his life easier but which will never be re-opened, or how people can teach their own child to steal. I've never had an experience remotely like that of a woman in her eighties, not a party to any dispute, searching the Center City where she's lived and strolled insouciantly for decades, unable to find a CVS within walking distance to fill her prescriptions that hasn't been boarded up and abandoned. Both the doctrinairely progressive university student, fueled by a steady stream of Venmo from her parents, convinced that all the right is on one side, and the third-generation Fishtowner armed with his baseball bat, just as sure it's on the other, are alien to me. Anarchists? I thought they went out of vogue after the assassinations of William McKinley and the Kaiserin Elisabeth of Austria, around 1900.

Bringing it home, I don't know how many of our community would be surprised to learn that our oldest alumni still remember when the first African American student attended La Salle. Though they remember him with respect and affection, I think it would be impossible to understand what that experience was like for him. Even a quarter century after that time, I remember a young woman who was the only African American student in my graduating class at a southern Catholic high school. She endured daily mimicry and "wisecracks" that would easily get the sources expelled today. Endure she did and got the diploma. Still, I doubt any of the other 223 of us understand what life was like for her.

This is not to say that it's somehow "easier" to be an African American student in our context, our school today. Many peers and adults alike hold certain unspoken assumptions: you must be good at sports; you must be getting a lot of financial aid; you

won't be prepared academically, certainly not for the honors and AP curriculum. While everyone else sits simply with people whose company they enjoy in the Glaser Center, the presumption is that "something is wrong" if African American students sit together at lunch rather than distributing themselves one per table throughout the dining hall. Does the hidden curriculum reinforce the equation that success equals "acting white"? And what of the experience of those who truly "choose their own path," become the only African American student doing debate, or musical theater, or tennis? Is it more likely you'll be valorized for your individual pursuit of your bliss or become marginal in two micro-cultures?

Yes, a statement would have been much easier to write. But a statement would imply I have more certainties than questions. And I'm not there right now. Sure, I know institutional racism is a social sin we need to repent and reject. Likewise, murder: it's the second sin, the first unoriginal one. You don't need to get any further than Genesis, Chapter 4 in any bible you might have close at hand to see that. So, I just choose to reflect as a person whose reactions may change each time I sit down to watch or read the news, but whose responses require more time to make sense of and to ground in the experience of this school.

Statements change nothing. Perhaps reflections don't either, even though Mr. O'Toole and I chose to take this more personal, more conversational approach. Understanding can make a difference. I'll be the first to admit 400 years is an awfully long time not to "get" something. You really do have to work at it. But we will have to work even harder at understanding. We can use abstract nouns like diversity and inclusivity—and even brotherhood--rather glibly then pat ourselves on the back and go away self-satisfied. Or we can do the hard, earnest work of trying to understand the experience of other people, despite the blinders race, culture, class, age, and education (too little or too much) may have slipped on us over time. Add a bit of luck and a whole lot of Grace, then maybe, just maybe, understanding can become wisdom, and our country will never move so quickly from the envy of the world to its pity again.

As one school year ends and another is prepared for, please join in the slow but active work of understanding that is La Salle. Whether you are here in Philadelphia or far away, please support that work by your actions and prayers. La Salle is already known far and wide as a school where you can grow smart, grow strong, grow generous, grow into a man. Help La Salle grow into a school known as the place where we strive to understand, the spot to grow wise, a home where we are inspired to follow

the example of Jesus, who understands the pain of who we are now and the potential of who we can be.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brother James Butler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "B".

Brother James Butler, FSC  
President  
La Salle College High School