Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
Sunday, September 14, 2014

An Open Letter to the Saint Louis University Community:

Over the past month, the Department of Campus Ministry has been watching the events unfold in Ferguson. We have held vigils for the SLU community to pray for peace that flows from justice. We have listened to stories from the African-American community as we seek to better understand the injustices that are at the root of this tragedy. But it is not enough to pray for peace, or even for justice, and we commit ourselves to fostering conversations that build a University community that promotes justice and celebrates diversity.

And so we looked to ourselves and our community. Even a brief survey of the bias incident logs from the previous year reveals that there is tension within our community. We are committed to listening to that tension and supporting this community by our shared prayer and by creating spaces for critical reflection on the signs of the times. We condemn the marginalization of any members of the SLU family and affirm the sacred dignity of all persons as made in the image and likeness of God.

As General Congregation 34 of the Society of Jesus stated, “Social change does not consist only in the transformation of economic and political structures, for these structures are themselves rooted in socio-cultural values and attitudes. Full human liberation, for the poor and for us all, lies in the development of communities of solidarity...where we can all work together towards total human development. And all of this must be done in the context of a sustainable, respectful interrelation between diverse peoples, cultures,...and the living God in our midst.”

The bias incidents we have seen on campus in the past year are the acts of a few, but we refuse the temptation to perceive them as if they have no connection to our greater community. We are compelled to examine our own role in a culture which fosters larger acts of aggression. The larger incidents that grab our attention can either shield us from, or help us to notice, the many smaller acts of aggression and thoughtlessness that people experience on a daily basis. That they do not end up on incident logs or evening news stories makes them no less hurtful and no less important.

Character is formed in large part by our habits, so we ask of ourselves and the wider community if we have developed habits that have shaped us into less than what we are called to be. So we invite you to reflect with us on how each one of us contributes to what our community has become:

- Do I condone prejudice by my participation or by my inaction, particularly when speaking out seems like a greater inconvenience than silence?
- Do I make the connection between faith and action by critiquing structures and attitudes that diminish others?
• Do I make an effort to get to know people who are different from me in appearance, beliefs, and lifestyle?
• Do we listen to members of vulnerable communities, both on and off campus, who can help us to see our own blind spots about how our unchallenged assumptions perpetuate hostility?

We believe that the incidents we have seen on campus in the past year flow from the inability to see beyond one's own experience of alienation. Coming to know one another as persons, as unique expressions of the human family, is the greatest antidote to reducing another person to an abstraction. Failure to do so creates a world within which larger acts of aggression are possible. We are better than that. We are better together. Let us commit ourselves to real conversion to the other, to caring for each person, and to honoring our University mission of the pursuit of truth, for the greater glory of God, for the service of humanity.

The Department of Campus Ministry, to that end, commits itself to the following:

• Hosting a dialogue for the University community on Sunday, September 21, 2014 at 6:00 pm in the College Church ballroom with the opportunity to reflect on how each one of us contributes to what our community has become.
• Reaching out to appropriate University departments and student groups by October 10, 2014 to plan a training session on non-violent communication for the campus.
• Accelerating outreach to underrepresented and marginalized groups to welcome them to Campus Ministry and to see how we can best serve their needs.
• Inviting the University community, through the Campus Ministry website, to share reflections and make suggestions about how we can be catalysts for change and what you might hope for from us and with us.
• Continuing to utilize our Catholic, Jesuit tradition of prayer and reflection to promote a faith that serves justice.
• Evaluating our efforts by December 1, 2014 in order to make additional plans of action for spring 2015.

In the spirit of love and hope for our University community,

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