

ENCOUNTER. ACCOMPANY. LISTEN. LEARN.

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This month marks the first anniversary of the killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 under the knee of then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Chauvin's conviction on April 20, 2021 on all counts brings this chapter closer to its end – sentencing is scheduled for June – but it leaves unanswered some large questions, questions which were in the air well before the killing: What is “justice?” Can our systems of justice acknowledge and deal with [institutionalized racism](#)? What can individuals and groups do to effect change?

A starting point for some answers can be the response to Chauvin's verdict issued by the [Catholic Mobilizing Network](#) (CMN):

True justice requires more than accountability alone. True justice seeks to center the needs of victims, make amends, and transform broken systems. And from this perspective, there is still much work to be done.

The “true justice” described above evokes consideration of restorative justice principles and practices which, in the [words of the CMN](#), “can offer healing ways of addressing the deep harms of racial oppression and transforming the broken systems which give them rise.”

In other words, a huge challenge with no quick solution and no obvious place to start. So let's step back ... a year ago, in the days following George Floyd's killing, Pope Francis, Archbishop José H. Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and seven bishop chairmen of committees within the USCCB all issued statements and public prayers. In a short [video](#) the CMN reflected that the #1 takeaway from these pronouncements is that we must “encounter, accompany, listen to, and learn from” those who “historically have been disenfranchised.”

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Might these steps – encountering, accompanying, listening, learning – be useful for someone discerning what he or she can do? More to the point, might they be useful in efforts to understand and implement what the CMN calls “true justice?”

My answer to both questions is a qualified “Yes.”

Qualified because each of us brings to our advocacy work different experiences, skill sets, and networks of connections, so each of us must decide for ourselves how to incorporate new levels of encountering, accompanying, listening, and learning into our lives and, more specifically, into our growth as advocates.

For example, my involvement with the MSJC and with the Miami Valley Chapter of Ohioans to Stop Executions has included organizing and/or attending numerous presentations by people with direct capital punishment experience: exonerees, murder victims' family members, prison officials, attorneys, judges, legislators, activists, etc. As a result, I have a good cognitive understanding of our death penalty system ... but it wasn't until I started reading [*Crimson Letters: Voices from Death Row*](#)¹ that I felt an emotional connection. The book is 29 essays written by four Death Row prisoners and assembled by Tessie Castillo who got to know the inmates when she volunteered to teach a journaling class. Behind the facts and figures I can cite about the death penalty are now some beating hearts, crying eyes, bruised bodies, and, yes, even some hopeful spirits. Nothing can restore the lives of the victims of capital crimes but failing to recognize the humanity of those on Death Row ... failing to encounter their lives ... is, for me, not an acceptable response.

¹ Castillo, Tessie, et al. *Crimson Letters: Voices from Death Row*. Black Rose Writing, 2020.