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Religious communities must stop blessing war...

CAN'T WE ALL GET ALONG?

By Stephen F. Rohde

"Riot is the language of the unheard." – Martin Luther King, Jr.

IF EVER A SINGLE SPARK OF INJUSTICE IGNITED A LONG SMOLDERING POWDER KEG OF DESPAIR, OPPRESSION, DISENFRANCHISEMENT, ANGER AND FRUSTRATION, it was the April 29, 1992 acquittal of four LAPD officers on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and assault under color of authority in the March 3, 1991 beating of Rodney King.

Over ten years later, the videotaped images of the white police officers savagely striking a defenseless black man with their batons fifty-six times, kicking him in the head and body and torturing him with a Taser stun gun, while a sergeant and 20 other officers stood nearby, remains indelibly fixed in our memories.

When the trial of the four officers was moved to Simi Valley, a predominantly white community with a black population of only 1.5 percent and home to thousands of white law-enforcement families, many feared the reaction in Los Angeles if the officers were not convicted.

But no one could have predicted what actually occurred as word of the acquittal spread and violence erupted throughout the city. In the end, fifty-four people were killed, 2,383 injured (221 critically) and 13,212 arrested. With more than five thousand buildings burned, property damage estimates varied from \$700 million to \$900 million. Grocery stores were destroyed, along with clinics, dry cleaners, storefront churches, fast food stores, banks, and entire shopping plazas.

The human toll was devastating. Everywhere there was anger, resentment, confusion, fear and despair. Many could not find food, diapers, milk or medicine. Small family businesses were destroyed. Jobs disappeared overnight. Looting, burning, beatings and killings swept throughout Los Angeles. No group was spared, but the brunt of the devastation fell on minority communities, already the victims of centuries of broken promises, economic deprivation, racism and neglect. To try to save Los Angeles First Korean United Methodist Church, someone covered the word "Korean" which appeared twice on the outside of the church.

Labeled the "L.A. Riots" by most politicians and commentators in the media, the violent reaction to the Rodney King verdicts was seen by others, particularly those who tried to fathom the deeper causes of what happened, as an uprising or rebellion.

Malcolm X said, "Violence is as American as apple pie." In April 1992, Operation Desert Storm; the mining of the harbors in Nicaragua; torture and death squads in Guatemala, El Salvador and Chile; the invasions of Panama and Granada and the bombing of Iraq, killing one hundred fifty thousand innocent people, were all fresh examples of America's resort to violence around the world.

It has escaped the attention of many that back at home the cycle of violence was renewed only one week before the rebellion, when the State of California resumed capital punishment after a 25 year moratorium by executing Robert Alton Harris on April 21, 1992, teaching the dreadful lesson that if the state can take bloody revenge, why not the people?

In 1992, the number one cause of death of black males between fifteen and forty-four was homicide. Twenty thousand three hundred and fifteen young black men were killed between 1978 and 1987; guns were involved 78% of the

time. The homicide rate among black males rose more than 65% between 1987 and 1992; 95% of the rise was due to killings by guns. Blacks were 6% of the nation's population, 3% of the college population and 46% of the prison population. Twenty-three percent of black men in their twenties were in prison or on probation or parole.

In 1992, the poor were suffering. Twenty million Americans were jobless, one of every twenty-five on welfare, one in every ten on food stamps, thirty-five million in poverty. It cost \$34,000 a year to send a child to a youth correctional center in downtown Los Angeles, but only \$6,000 a year to educate her at Cal. State L.A. When President George Bush wanted \$500 million to bail out the Savings & Loans, he got it overnight, but the poor and the cities of American went without.

In the wake of the Rodney King verdicts and the ensuing rebellion, at the time of the year when Easter and Passover intersect, priests, rabbis, ministers and clergy of many faiths put aside their conventional sermons and tried to help their congregations deal with their anger, fear and shock. Many who have come together since September 11 to form Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace, were instrumental ten years ago in urging their followers to reject violence and to seek peace and justice.

Rev. Ignacio Castuera, a founder of ICUJP, was pastor of Hollywood United Methodist Church in 1992. He collected the words of the clergy in a book entitled *Dreams on Fire / Embers of Hope: From the Pulpits of Los Angeles After the Riots* (Chalice Press, 1992). Rev. Castuera quoted from a statement issued by the Methodist Council of Bishops condemning the Rodney King verdicts as an endorsement of "police misconduct" and from a personal statement from Bishop Jack Tuell that the acquittal sent the unacceptable message that "the brutal beating of a defenseless man by police is all right."

Rev. James Lawson, another founder of ICUJP and then pastor of Holman United Methodist Church, said that Easter is "a call to be accountable." He asked: "Why is America destroying, killing people in Central America? Why are American tax dollars ravaging Mozambique and Angola? Why are we Americans killing each other at such a high rate? Why is there so much rape and family abuse and wife battering and all the rest of the violence that goes on in our society?"

Asking if we are "accountable enough to join the human family," Rev. Lawson set forth an agenda as imperative today as it was then: "Serving our city in order that we can be engaged in healing the wounds, feeding the hungry, lifting up the needs of the people – and, I will add, continuing to work for justice. We will also continue to work that the police department be reformed. We will also continue to work that the criminal justice system will be changed so that the poor and the young and the people of color can gain justice in our midst."

On Sunday, May 3, 1992, another founder of ICUJP, Rabbi Steven Jacobs, spoke at Calvary Baptist Church in South Central Los Angeles. He called the events of the previous few days "a defining moment in American history" when "the voiceless have spoken and are now being heard." He acknowledged that after the Rodney King verdicts, "there is great pessimism in the black community about justice in America," and he pledged "to build bridges and to prevent the bridges from being destroyed anymore."

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Father Chris Ponnet, another founder of ICUJP, joined together with eleven other Christian leaders, lay and clergy, to issue a powerful Christian Confession of Conscience on May 15, 1992, which uncompromisingly declared that: "Sadly, history has yet again demonstrated that the dominant culture remains blind to race and class oppression and deaf to the cries of the disenfranchised unless and until there is a riot." As people "committed to non-violent social transformation," the drafters declared that they could not "endorse the recent violence," but nonetheless insisted on recognizing that "we too bear responsibility for it."

"Indeed, as long as violence remains the language by which the dominant culture maintains its power, the unheard will be forced to use violence to reach us with their demands for justice."

The statement called for a series of reforms to address the systemic causes of the rebellion, each of which remains unfinished and serves as a clarion call in 2002 as much as in 1992:

1. **Sober reflection upon the meaning of the riots, in order "to deepen our comprehension of their rootedness in structural injustice."**
2. **Long-term efforts "to promote community policing strategies."**
3. **State and federal legislation "to enact and enforce strict gun control laws."**
4. **Rebuild community trust in the LAPD.**
5. **"Reconciliation, not criminalization and revictimization of those driven by racial and economic injustices to riot."**
6. **End to the "collaboration" between the LAPD and the Immigration and Naturalization Service.**
7. **Combat discrimination based on race and class, produce jobs and rebuild our communities.**

Ten years later, the question remains whether another spark of injustice could again set Los Angeles aflame. No serious observer can claim that racism, discrimination, police abuse, economic injustice and poverty have been eliminated from Los Angeles or anywhere else in America. All of these stains on our society remain and cry out for our sustained attention.

But the progress that has been achieved over the last decade in advancing the cause of justice and equality is now in jeopardy in the aftermath of September 11. The Bush administration's obsession with financing an endless war against the "axis of evil," threatens to drain enormous resources and distract attention from the vital challenge of educating, training and employing millions of Americans, overwhelmingly poor and people of color.

The War on Terrorism is also undermining growing efforts at reconciliation among ethnic and religious groups in our cities. Although President Bush announced that the teachings of Islam are "good and peaceful" and that the "enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends," from the outset Attorney General John Ashcroft has targeted young Muslim and Arab men from Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries for questioning and detention, some indefinitely without charges, many innocent of any crimes. Meanwhile, the I.N.S. has announced that of the 360,000 illegal aliens in the United States from all over the world, including Canada, Mexico, Europe and South America, 6,000 individuals from the Middle East and Central Asia will be selectively deported on an accelerated schedule.

Actions speak louder than words. Despite President Bush's platitudes, his administration's policies smack of racial profiling and have added to an atmosphere of hate and bigotry, which has led to several murders and thousands of acts of vandalism, hate crimes and discrimination against Muslims, Arabs and Sikhs.

Once the stench of racism toward some groups begins to spread, especially with the endorsement of the nation's highest officials, it

contaminates other groups and breeds bias and prejudice, the very inflammatory conditions which were ignited ten years ago.

Efforts to encourage tolerance and mutual respect among religious and ethnic groups, begun in earnest ten years ago, must now be redoubled. ICUJP has pledged itself to that cause.

Finally, a serious look at Los Angeles ten years after the rebellion calls for a serious assessment of the LAPD. In July, 1991, four months after the King beating, but nine months before the rebellion, the Christopher Commission, which had been established to conduct "a full and fair examination of the structure and operation of the LAPD," issued its report. The Commission found that there are "a significant number of officers in the LAPD who repetitively use excessive force against the public and persistently ignore the written guidelines of the department regarding force;" that there is "a significant breakdown in the management and leadership of the Department;" and that there should be "a new standard of accountability."

Few of the Commission's recommendations have been adopted. Police abuse, compounded by corruption, persists in the LAPD, exemplified by the recent Rampart scandal, resulting in a federal consent decree, which among other things forced the Department to collect statistics on racial profiling, something Chief Bernard Parks had opposed.

The proper role of the LAPD when it comes to immigrants in our city has never been more important. In 1979, in response to disturbing incidents in which LAPD officers turned over undocumented workers to the INS for deportation, the Department issued Special Order 40 which prohibited officers from cooperating with the INS and from inquiring into the immigration status of any individual.

For over 20 years, Special Order 40 has allowed undocumented workers to report crimes and to be protected from abuse and exploitation. The LAPD is not the military arm of the INS and Special Order 40 establishes an important wall of separation between the two institutions. It preserves the critical distinction between law enforcement and immigration policy. Police officers are not trained and have not sworn an oath to interrogate immigrants over their status and to assist in their deportation.

Indeed, when a little noticed provision of Prop. 187, adopted in November 1994, purported to require law enforcement agencies to cooperate with the INS, the L.A. City Council refused to rescind Special Order 40 and eventually U.S. District Court Judge Mariana Pfaelzer ruled that Prop. 187 was unconstitutional.

With renewed anti-immigrant rhetoric beginning to spread after September 11, now focusing on Muslims and Arabs from the Middle East and Central Asia, it is more important than ever to maintain Special Order 40 and to preserve and improve the relationship between the LAPD and every immigrant community, documented and undocumented.

Good relations marked by respect and trust between the police and the public is the best guarantee against a repetition of the Rodney King beatings and the ensuing rebellion. A police force that takes seriously its oath to uphold the Constitution will not savagely beat any human being.

Can't we all get along? Only if each one of us takes personal responsibility to make it happen, by pursuing tolerance and mutual respect in our daily lives and by pursuing equality and justice in our city and by pursuing peace and human rights throughout the world.

Stephen Rohde, a constitutional lawyer and author of the new book *AMERICAN WORDS OF FREEDOM*, is a founder of ICUJP and immediate past President of the ACLU of Southern California.