Human History: Remember the Good and Bad, but don't Erase it.

A couple of years ago, when I visited New York City, I went to the Museum of Natural History. In it are reconstructed skeletons of dinosaurs; a lot of fossils and numerous exhibits on birds and mammals over the centuries.

Also in front of this building is a statue of Teddy Roosevelt. I'm not sure what the history of the statue is, but it makes sense that it would be there, because Roosevelt was very much devoted to conservation. Because of him, we have the National Park System, as he loved nature. An avid hunter, he was also, like many hunters, very aware of the need for conservation and protection of nature.

Not everyone is a fan of the statue though apparently, which was put there in 1940. And so the museum has decided to remove it, as it depicts him on horseback with a Native American man and an African man standing next to the horse. According to the museum president it depicts Black and Indigenous people as "subjected" and "racially inferior." From what I read though they are on the statues to be guiding Roosevelt and not meant to be disrespectful at all.

I suppose the fact that the statue is being removed by museum staff and not a roving mob should be considered progress these days. For in the past weeks, we've seen numerous statues defaced and attacked. In Golden Gate Park, Saint Junipero Serra's statue was toppled, as was a statue of Ulysses S. Grant. Miguel de Cervantes who wrote "Don Quixote" was defaced there too (he was a slave himself at one point). In Philadelphia, a statue of abolitionist Matthias Baldwin was defaced. And at our own state capital, a statue of Christopher Columbus was toppled as despite some concern of trouble, there was no security or police on hand at the time to prevent it from happening. The statue was created by an Italian immigrant and dedicated on October 12, 1931.

Much has been troubling with these and other actions from the rioters who toppled and defaced these monuments. Certainly the acts themselves are disturbing. But also is the iconoclasm.

For one, it is easy to look in the past through the eyes of the present and notice the shortcomings of those who held different beliefs we now know to be wrong. In the examples of the statues I cited, I can't say what the moral objections would be to these people. Beyond these statues have been others attacked or removed as well, including various statues in other parts of the country of military leaders of the Confederacy. Yes, they were people who fought against the Union and would have endorsed slavery. That is wrong. But were there also good characteristics of these soldiers? Is there a historical significance to remembering them and honoring them or the Confederacy? (I am not arguing remove Confederate statues or keep them, rather simply saying look at the big picture). We can certainly look at many things from the past and be rather shocked at what were widespread beliefs. Even in the Bible, there are many instances of things happening we would find abhorrent today. In the Old Testament, many people are put to the sword. In the New Testament, Saint Paul has women as second-class citizens and

the Letter to Philemon has Paul saying welcome Onesimus, a runaway slave back, but he doesn't condemn slavery. We can study the Bible through scholarship and the guidance of the Spirit and know God does not condone destroying entire groups of people, or slavery, and that women and men are to be seen as equal. But just as those who went before us were not as enlightened on some things, so too will those who come generations after us maybe look at us as not enlightened in many things we do today, such as killing the unborn or condemned criminals. This does not mean that human beings from across centuries should not be honored and remembered for the good things they may have done.

Second, how we honor and remember our history needs to be a process. Some in recent weeks have toppled statues without consequence, destroying public property. This isn't acceptable. A few years back, in Belle Plaine, a satanic statue was proposed on public land. There was as you might expect a bit of a dust up, but there were also peaceful protests and a process. No one burned anything down or beat anyone up. A soldier kneeling at a cross was a monument that was there at the time, so the satanists made the case they should have a monument too on public land. So the city took down the monument of the kneeling soldier not wanting to risk having to be forced to have the satanic monument. Again, there was no rioting. As of now there is apparently no monument at all. It's unfortunate, and I'd contend a kneeling soldier is generic and fail to see why this would violate the Establishment clause, and would contend a satanic statue isn't warranted there unless you can prove to me a lot of the fallen soldiers honored there were in fact satanists. But that's beside the point. The point is this: there was a process here that was largely peaceful, and there was discussion. If a group wants to have a statue removed, we have law and order; you can petition a city, go to a city council meeting, or write an elected official. We aren't talking about a revolution here where we are toppling a statue of a Nazi or a Communist or some dictator like we saw when Communist governments fell in 1989 and 1990. We are talking about in the US a country that had, through a process, put up various statues of historical figures. I don't much care for the bust of Margaret Sanger, Planned Parenthood founder, at the Smithsonian, or Vladimir Lenin's statue in Seattle, but it would never even cross my mind to vandalize these statues because I do not own them. I can express an opinion on them. And it could be that as we go through time, some statues are best removed or replaced. But we need to look at what kind of setting and society the person lived in, and weigh what the statue represents and conveys.

Lastly, it is so important that we learn from the past. I truly believe some of the people showing up to tear down a statue do not know anything at all about the person on the statue. Some maybe just want to destroy; others are truly ignorant of the story of the person the statue represents. It's easy to look to people in centuries gone by and say "why didn't they do things this way" or "they really should have believed this." But this again does not obscure the good things they may have done. We need to learn about these people. Statues are there for a reason. In our religion they help us to pray and to think about great people who intercede for us (saints). In the public sphere, they remind us of important people we can learn from, and inspire us to learn more about those people. What a great thing it would be if rather than run to tear down the statue

honoring the fallen soldiers of the First Regiment of Virginia Infantry in Richmond or General Albert Pike, people instead said “who is that person” and then wanted to learn more about them, and learn about why the monument was there, and then perhaps have an actual discussion about whether it is best to keep the monument there or not.

I think each generation can sometimes feel like we have it all sorted out and are the “enlightened” ones. But all of us through the effects of original sin do bad things to one another, and each generation accepts things that are morally wrong. But people through the ages are also capable of incredible contributions to the world and many statutes show us people like all of us who were sinners, but also people who may have been incredibly brave, a great leader, a great artist, or a great philosopher. Hopefully we can not be ignorant of the past, or foolish enough to think we can create a society where all is perfect, but rather learn from the past, and work together by listening to one another rather than hating and shouting at one another, and become more tolerant. History has so much to teach us, so let’s not erase it, but learn from the good others have done while also learning from their mistakes, remembering we too have many of our own but just like those who went before us, we are all works in progress being formed by the love of God which we strive to respond to.

Have a very blessed week,

Fr. Paul