Dear USF Community,

Like many of you, I have been gathering in community with friends, neighbors, and colleagues to grieve and pray in recent days. In the wake of shocking, horrific attacks motivated by anti-Semitism, racism, nationalism, and other forms of hateful bias at home and abroad, it is an immediate and comforting response. I have found support and consolation among people who are as stricken and traumatized as all of us are. I was honored to be asked to speak at Temple Emanu-El this past Sunday, one of many civic and religious leaders who stood together to affirm human dignity and inalienable worth. This Monday I spent much of the day at a Jewish Community Relations Council seminar on tribalism, nationalism, and the role of faith communities in crafting peace and justice, in and beyond Israel.

I am grateful to University Ministry for organizing Monday’s campus prayer. I know many of your classrooms and mentors’ offices are also becoming the place to find support and to engage in difficult conversations about what is happening in our world.

Words can fail us at times like these, when the litany of recent events is so overwhelming and disheartening: The shooting by a white assailant that left 11 dead and six wounded at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh seems to have been fueled by online anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant rhetoric. The mailing of pipe bombs across the country to multiple public figures, public servants, and news outlets seems similarly sparked by hateful language. Two African Americans were shot and killed at a supermarket in Jeffersontown, Kentucky, after the white suspect failed to enter a predominantly black Baptist church. Poor and frightened families fleeing violence and desperate conditions in Latin America are being characterized as “invaders” and threatened with a U.S. military response at our border.
Recently, reports that the White House is reviewing policies and definitions of sex and gender have deeply troubled our transgender students and all of us who support and stand with them. We must stay attuned to the effect that words can have. The language being used in this White House policy discussion is but one example of the denial of established science, and it is having an impact on our world, our environment, and members of our own community.

I urge all members of the USF community to find solace here on campus and in your own communities — and to find your voice. We must keep talking. We cannot become desensitized. As a community we must be prepared to be outraged, to stand against and speak out against racist, sexist, anti-Semitic language and actions.

Empathy and understanding are not enough. We have a responsibility to speak out when we see, hear, or experience anti-Semitism, hate speech, and hate-filled, disrespectful actions. Our intellectual integrity demands that we enter into the debate; our faith in humanity invites us to do so seeking the establishment of truth and the conversion of those who are wrong. Foundational to our worldview is the belief in the inalienable dignity and worth of every human person, a revelation that God accorded to the Chosen People, asking them to share it with all nations.

I am proud to be a member of this diverse, inclusive community. In this troubling, frightening time, I urge you be vigilant in standing for USF values, for unity in diversity, and inclusive excellence based on mutual respect. Later this week, we are invited to celebrate the Feast of All Saints, when we recall the heroes and the exemplars of the past. The following day, we celebrate All Souls, when we invoke all who have gone before us into the peace of God's rest. May they pray for us and guide us in the ways of peace.

Sincerely,

Paul J. Fitzgerald, S.J.
President

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