

Fawcett: Even policing, prone to violence as oppression as it is, can be sanctified



On June 30, Edmonton city council voted to reduce funding to local police by \$11 million with the intent of reallocating that money towards what Mayor Don Iveson called “other community safety initiatives beyond, and in parallel to, the Edmonton Police Service.”

This financial shuffling was a comparatively mild implementation of the continent-sweeping rallying cry to “defund the police!” This comes in the wake of the infuriating video of the death of George Floyd, suffocating on the ground under the knee of a white police officer.

In an impassioned half-hour rant on the subject with something of the prophetic about it, comedian Dave Chapelle demanded to know how other police officers could stand idly by while Officer Derek Chauvin held Floyd down.

“What are you signifying?” Chapelle asked indignantly. “That you can kneel on a man’s neck for *eight minutes and 46 seconds* and feel like you wouldn’t get *the wrath of God?*”

For now, the usual cultural perception of police as heroic (think of the statue of Const. Ezio Faraone hopefully reaching out over Edmonton’s river valley) has quietly stepped offstage. We are at the point where Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York has claimed that the police are being unfairly “demoniz(ed)” and that

the courageous and virtuous conduct of most police officers is being neglected.

The idea of involving other professions that are committed to caring for the mentally unstable, and de-escalating dangerous situations in crisis response contexts, is a promising one. But merely institutional changes, even nobly-intentioned ones, seem inadequate.

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police were originally formed, in part, to protect Indigenous people from American whiskey traders, but this did not prevent the later ugly episodes of First Nations repression in the RCMP's history. Nor should we assume that the vulnerable are necessarily safer just because social workers are now involved.

Sadly, they are also capable of abuse; British Columbia has just reached a multimillion-dollar settlement with over a hundred victims of a single abusive social worker. Any position of power involving vulnerable people is a temptation to abuse, as we Catholics know all too painfully well. These kinds of institutional adjustments may be necessary, but they are not sufficient. A deeper conversion must happen first.

We are not in uncharted waters here. As Christians, we can look to Scripture and the history of the Church for direction, for they provide us with precedents we can apply to our contemporary situation.

During the New Testament, the role of using force to repel crime was filled by the Roman soldiers, who, as Hilaire Belloc put it in *Europe and the Faith*, were regarded by the average citizen of the Empire as "a necessary police force."

When we read of soldiers in this context, we need to think more of police officers than of infantry. Leon Morris observes in his commentary on Luke's Gospel that soldiers "were in a privileged position over the general public. Citizens could have little redress when troops used violence or false charges to rob them."

In that light, it isn't surprising that John the Baptist tells the soldiers who come to him, "Neither intimidate any one nor lay false charges; and be content with your pay" (Weymouth New Testament translation).

In other words, don't use unnecessary violence, don't terrorize citizens, and don't falsely accuse people. This is the only way first-century police can save themselves from the wrath that is to come; if they don't obey this command, they will be cut down and cast into the fire (*Luke 3:7, 9*).

The Church usually doesn't threaten people with hell today, and while we need to affirm God's overwhelming mercy, perhaps our preaching and evangelization has minimized the fact that hell is a real possibility for unrepented sin.

In Ken Follett's medieval novel *Pillars of the Earth*, the fear of hell is enough to stop the corrupt Sheriff William from using violence on peasants and

force him into grudgingly observing social justice. Sometimes, this kind of deterrent may be what it takes. As Chapelle recognized, those cops might have been more solicitous of Floyd's life if they had feared "the wrath of God."

But, intriguingly, the New Testament contains several positive portrayals of Roman centurions. Jesus praises one for his faith (*Matthew 8:5-13*), another recognizes Jesus as the Son of God (*Matthew 27:54*), and still another is the first Gentile convert to Christianity (*Acts 10*).

At no point are any of these soldiers told that they must leave military service because they have become followers of Christ. In other words, we have the suggestion that even the policing profession, prone to violence as oppression as it is, can be sanctified.

This sanctification happens through Church discipline. Christians were allowed to be soldiers, but if they ever killed someone doing their job, they would be denied communion until they did penance.

This was not the private affair it is today: it was more like preparation for baptism, an almost year-long process of public repentance. St. Basil the Great would have gone even further. Even though he admitted that a soldier killing in the course of his duty was different than murder, he still counselled those who had taken a life to "abstain from communion for three years." (*Letter 188*).

Defenders of the police rightly point out that, sometimes, the use of deadly force may be necessary. The Church has never denied that. But the seriousness of destroying someone made in the image of God (*Genesis 9:6*) meant that even hands that had killed in self-defence were defiled with blood.

We don't like denying people communion in the Church today any more than we like preaching about hell, but we must wonder: Would police officers be more solicitous about de-escalating violent situations if they knew that taking a life would ban them from communing for a year? I leave this for the reader to ponder.

One last idea: The premise that someone should still be Christlike even in a policing role eventually birthed the Christian notion of chivalry, developed and defined by figures like St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Under chivalry, knights took a vow to behave honourably and mercifully rather than like hired thugs. Where this vow was respected, it served as a check on the wanton brutality that too often broke out on the battlefield.

In the face of documented modern police brutality and injustice, should the Church develop a new, updated code of chivalry for the age of the body camera? Interestingly, the roots of the word "chivalry" are in the Latin word for "horseman"; one thinks of the Royal Canadian *Mounted* Police.

Could be a new chivalric vow, taken by the congregants at the Blue Mass, a promise to God to always obey the commandments John the Baptist gave to the

police of his day, to always use their weapons to protect of the Christ-bearers they encounter every day in the street rather than harm them? (Remember how the soldier Martin of Tours was kind to a beggar who approached his horse, only to discover that it was Jesus in disguise.)

The Church may not have the political and social power today that she had in the Middle Ages. But even before the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the way she preached and exercised discipline has always been a powerful witness to how force should be used: in a way that honours Christ, the Prince of Peace with a sword coming out of His mouth (*Revelation 19:15*).

Let us never fail to honour those police officers who serve with chivalry and self-denying heroism, whose jobs are never easy and who must constantly rely on the intercession of St. Michael the Archangel, patron of the police.

Let us also never forget the God who hears the cry of those who are oppressed and is found among the poor, including the poor who are in prison (*Matthew 25:36*). And may we, the citizens of the righteous coming kingdom, never tire in letting the Spirit guide us in finding ways to make that kingdom visible in our world today.

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