

Father James Martin. Facebook. January 21st, 2019

Fr. James Martin, SJ

Dear friends: I regret wading into the Covington High School controversy this weekend. For it seems that we may never know exactly what was going on inside the hearts of those high school students. So I would like to apologize to them for my condemnation of their actions.

Others will disagree, but my conscience tells me that it's unjust to condemn someone's actions when their actions are unclear. And to me, despite repeated viewings of those videos, and reading the participants' statements, their actions, and the motivations behind those actions, still remain unclear.

Still, several issues still need to be addressed. I'll raise them as questions for someone—participants, journalists, the school or diocese—to clarify.

First, where were the chaperones? The lack of adult supervision of the students is striking, and most likely contributed to this incendiary event. Friends who are high school administrators all say that they were stupefied by this.

Second, why were students shouting when Nate Phillips was chanting and drumming? Was it nervousness (say their supporters) or disrespect (say their opponents)? It's hard to tell. But would it have been so hard for the students simply to simply listen to him?

Third, why were so many Covington students wearing MAGA hats? It's a free country, for sure, but they were at the March for Life, a religious event, under the care of their Catholic high school administrators, not a political rally.

Fourth, how has the March for Life become so politicized? The over-politicization of this religious event, and the over-reliance on political figures to draw crowds, is unnecessary, irreligious and even dangerous.

Finally, I don't buy the "No one should weigh in until all the facts are in." Because all the facts are never in. At some point, people are justified in offering opinions. My mistake was offering a condemnation, and for that I apologize.

That being said, I will leave the investigation to the media and the school authorities. But I pray that this incendiary event will somehow be a teachable moment for our church and our country.

Americamagazine.org January 19th, 2019

[Jack Jenkins - Religion News Service](#) | [Emily McFarlan Miller - Religion News Service](#)

Editor's note: This article and headline have been updated to reflect new information about the incident; see detailed corrections and update notes at the end of the story. See latest coverage of this incident [here](#).

WASHINGTON (RNS) — A Catholic high school in Kentucky is apologizing after videos surfaced of students dressed in the school's garb confronting and mocking a group of Native Americans—including one man believed to be a Vietnam War veteran—in Washington, D.C.

[Several clips](#) of the encounter circulating on social media show a small group of Native American drummers, who were in Washington for the Indigenous People's March, being surrounded by a much larger band of teenagers.

Most were young men who wore hats or shirts bearing Donald Trump's campaign slogan "Make America Great Again." Others wore clothing with references to the March for Life, an anti-abortion event convened on Jan. 18 that the students attended.

Some of the young men wore hoodies that bore the logo of Covington Catholic High School in Park Hills, Kentucky.

In one of the [videos](#), the young men clap along to the drumbeat of a man who [Indian Country Today](#) identified as Nathan Phillips, an Omaha elder and Vietnam War veteran. But the moment quickly turns confrontational as the mass begins mocking the elderly man by shouting a faux Native American chant used by the Atlanta Braves and other sports teams.

The crowd then begins to laugh and shout as one young man, donning a Make America Great Again hat, stands in front of Phillips and stares, grinning.

As the crowd continues to heckle and chant, Phillips stares back and continues to drum, seemingly unfazed. But his companions appear to grow increasingly agitated as the crowd encircles them.

"You guys are acting like a mob!" one woman yells at the camera.

Covington Catholic officials did not respond to multiple requests from Religion News Service for comment. They [released a joint statement](#) with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Covington Saturday afternoon.

"We condemn the actions of the Covington Catholic High School students towards Nathan Phillips specifically, and Native Americans in general, Jan 18., after the March for Life, in Washington, D.C.," the statement read.

"We extend our deepest apologies to Mr. Phillips. This behavior is opposed to the Church's teachings on the dignity and respect of the human person. The matter is being investigated and we will take appropriate action, up to and including expulsion. We know this incident also has tainted the entire witness of the March for Life and express our most sincere apologies to all those who attended the March and all those who support the pro-life movement."

Chase Iron Eyes, lead counsel for the Lakota Peoples Law Project and a spokesperson for the Indigenous Peoples Movement, witnessed the encounter.

In an interview with RNS, Iron Eyes said Phillips and several others were closing out the ceremonies of the Indigenous Peoples March by blessing the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial when they observed 30 or 40 teenaged boys engaged in a back-and-forth with a small group of black religious demonstrators.

Another [video](#) widely shared on Jan. 20 showed the demonstrators repeatedly yelling insults and curses at the students. The students eventually responded by shouting school chants. One student removed his shirt as his companions yelled.

Iron Eyes said Phillips attempted to defuse the situation by offering a song, "trying to get young people to listen," and [video](#) shows him walking over to the students while drumming. Iron Eyes called the AIM Song, associated with the 1970s American Indian Movement, a "spiritual symbol," saying the wordless melody "is meant for all of us to sing."

"To have our elders who are closing out, you know, a beautiful day—one that started kind of chilly and cold, but the sun came out and joined us and blessed us—to have them go through that was a particularly egregious ordeal," he said.

Iron Eyes called the students behavior “unfortunate and sad.” He said that they were following the example of President Trump.

“They’re just responding to a president that is giving license to racists and bigots who have no place in our society,” he said.

Still, he expressed concern for the students.

“I wouldn’t even wish ill will on those kids,” he said.

In a statement [posted online](#) Sunday by CNN’s Jake Tapper, the student seen in the stare-down with Phillips said his actions also were an attempt to defuse the situation. Covington Catholic junior Nick Sandmann cited his Catholic faith and said he tries to live out its ideals, including being respectful of others and not taking any action that would lead to conflict or violence.

Sandmann said he was “startled and confused” when the elder walked up to him, drumming, and “said a silent prayer that the situation would not get out of hand.”

“We had already been yelled at by another group of protestors, and when the second group approached I was worried that a situation was getting out of control where adults were attempting to provoke teenagers,” he said. The Archdiocese of Cincinnati also criticized the students’ actions, [tweeting](#) that “incident at the March 4 Life was unfortunate & regrettable.”

[According to Indian Country Today](#), Phillips is a former director of the Native Youth Alliance and holds an annual ceremony honoring Native American veterans in the Arlington National Cemetery.

A separate clip [posted to Twitter](#) appears to show him emotionally reacting to the encounter.

“I heard them saying ‘build that wall.’ This is indigenous land —we’re not supposed to have walls here, we never did,” he said. “Before anybody else came here, we never had walls ... We always took care of our elders, took care of our children.”

Phillips continued to speak over the sound of additional chanting in the distance: “I wish I could see the energy of that young mass of young men, put that energy into making this country really great — helping those that are hungry.”

Organizers of the Indigenous Peoples March condemned the incident.

“What we saw yesterday, the display surrounding Mr. Phillips, is emblematic of the state of our discourse in Trump’s America,” Darren Thompson, an organizer for the Indigenous Peoples Movement, said in a press release. “It clearly demonstrates the validity of our concerns about the marginalization and disrespect of Indigenous peoples, and it shows that traditional knowledge is being ignored by those who should listen most closely.”

In an initial statement, the March for Life described the behavior shown in the earliest shared videos as “reprehensible” and said that it did not represent the pro-life movement. The March for Life has since removed that statement from its website and Twitter account and now says they “[will refrain from commenting further until the truth is understood](#).”

Rep. Deb Haaland (D-N.M.), the first Native American woman elected to Congress, [decried the students’ actions on Twitter](#) Saturday, saying they displayed “blatant hate, disrespect, and intolerance.”

Phillips was reportedly the victim of a separate incident of student harassment [in 2015](#), when Eastern Michigan University students dressed as Native Americans allegedly threw a beer can at him and shouted racial slurs.

I am providing this factual account of what happened on [Friday afternoon at the Lincoln Memorial](#) to correct misinformation and outright lies being spread about my family and me.

I am the student in the video who was confronted by the Native American protestor. I arrived at the Lincoln Memorial at 4:30 p.m. I was told to be there by 5:30 p.m., when our busses were due to leave Washington for the trip back to Kentucky. We had been attending the March for Life rally, and then had split up into small groups to do sightseeing.

When we arrived, we noticed four African American protestors who were also on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. I am not sure what they were protesting, and I did not interact with them. I did hear them direct derogatory insults at our school group.

The protestors said hateful things. They called us "racists," "bigots," "white crackers," "faggots," and "incest kids." They also taunted an African American student from my school by telling him that we would "harvest his organs." I have no idea what that insult means, but it was startling to hear.

Because we were being loudly attacked and taunted in public, a student in our group asked one of our teacher chaperones for permission to begin our school spirit chants to counter the hateful things that were being shouted at our group. The chants are commonly used at sporting events. They are all positive in nature and sound like what you would hear at any high school. Our chaperone gave us permission to use our school chants. We would not have done that without obtaining permission from the adults in charge of our group. At no time did I hear any student chant anything other than the school spirit chants. I did not witness or hear any students chant "build that wall" or anything hateful or racist at any time. Assertions to the contrary are simply false. Our chants were loud because we wanted to drown out the hateful comments that were being shouted at us by the protestors.

After a few minutes of chanting, the Native American protestors, who I hadn't previously noticed, approached our group. The Native American protestors had drums and were accompanied by at least one person with a camera.

The protestor everyone has seen in the video began playing his drum as he waded into the crowd, which parted for him. I did not see anyone try to block his path. He locked eyes with me and approached me, coming within inches of my face. He played his drum the entire time he was in my face.

I never interacted with this protestor. I did not speak to him. I did not make any hand gestures or other aggressive moves. To be honest, I was startled and confused as to why he had approached me. We had already been yelled at by another group of protestors, and when the second group approached I was worried that a situation was getting out of control where adults were attempting to provoke teenagers.

I believed that by remaining motionless and calm, I was helping to diffuse the situation. I realized everyone had cameras and that perhaps a group of adults was trying to provoke a group of teenagers into a larger conflict. I said a silent prayer that the situation would not get out of hand.

During the period of the drumming, a member of the protestor's entourage began yelling at a fellow student that we "stole our land" and that we should "go back to Europe." I heard one of my fellow students begin to respond. I motioned to my classmate and tried to get him to stop engaging with the protestor, as I was still in the mindset that we needed to calm down tensions.

I never felt like I was blocking the Native American protestor. He did not make any attempt to go around me. It was clear to me that he had singled me out for a confrontation, although I am not sure why.

The engagement ended when one of our teachers told me the busses had arrived and it was time to go. I obeyed my teacher and simply walked to the busses. At that moment, I thought I had diffused the situation by remaining calm, and I was thankful nothing physical had occurred.

I never understood why either of the two groups of protestors were engaging with us, or exactly what they were protesting at the Lincoln Memorial. We were simply there to meet a bus, not become central players in a media

spectacle. This is the first time in my life I've ever encountered any sort of public protest, let alone this kind of confrontation or demonstration.

I was not intentionally making faces at the protestor. I did smile at one point because I wanted him to know that I was not going to become angry, intimidated or be provoked into a larger confrontation. I am a faithful Christian and practicing Catholic, and I always try to live up to the ideals my faith teaches me -- to remain respectful of others, and to take no action that would lead to conflict or violence.

I harbor no ill will for this person. I respect this person's right to protest and engage in free speech activities, and I support his chanting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial any day of the week. I believe he should re-think his tactics of invading the personal space of others, but that is his choice to make.

I am being called every name in the book, including a racist, and I will not stand for this mob-like character assassination of my family's name. My parents were not on the trip, and I strive to represent my family in a respectful way in all public settings.

I have received physical and death threats via social media, as well as hateful insults. One person threatened to harm me at school, and one person claims to live in my neighborhood. My parents are receiving death and professional threats because of the social media mob that has formed over this issue.

I love my school, my teachers and my classmates. I work hard to achieve good grades and to participate in several extracurricular activities. I am mortified that so many people have come to believe something that did not happen -- that students from my school were chanting or acting in a racist fashion toward African Americans or Native Americans. I did not do that, do not have hateful feelings in my heart, and did not witness any of my classmates doing that.

I cannot speak for everyone, only for myself. But I can tell you my experience with Covington Catholic is that students are respectful of all races and cultures. We also support everyone's right to free speech.

I am not going to comment on the words or account of Mr. Phillips, as I don't know him and would not presume to know what is in his heart or mind. Nor am I going to comment further on the other protestors, as I don't know their hearts or minds, either.

I have read that Mr. Phillips is a veteran of the United States Marines. I thank him for his service and am grateful to anyone who puts on the uniform to defend our nation. If anyone has earned the right to speak freely, it is a U.S. Marine veteran.

I can only speak for myself and what I observed and felt at the time. But I would caution everyone passing judgement based on a few seconds of video to watch the longer video clips that are on the internet, as they show a much different story than is being portrayed by people with agendas.

I provided this account of events to the Diocese of Covington so they may know exactly what happened, and I stand ready and willing to cooperate with any investigation they are conducting