



Choosing Life: A joint pastoral statement on violence

April 19, 2000

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Is 55:8).

These words from the Old Testament lie at the root of this week, which, for Christians, is the holiest time of the year. Over these next few days, in private prayer and public liturgy, we remember the story of our salvation. We remember the violence we did to the Son of God, and the love God returned to us in bearing it. We remember that we are each of us murderers . . . and yet each of us is forgiven and redeemed. We who fashioned the cross are saved by it. We who shaped the iron nails and hammered them into the wrists of Jesus, are delivered by His blood. The very name of Christ proclaims His mission: He is Yeshua, Jesus, which means "God saves."

This is the lesson of Holy Week. God is not merely "good." He is holy in the ancient Hebrew sense of the word — He is other than us, and His ways are other than our sinful ways. And He calls us out of our own ways and into His. God transforms the hatred in the world by the love for us which He offered in His own suffering. He invites us to do the same through His Holy Spirit, and by doing so, to share with Him a new and eternal life.

Five years ago today, Oklahoma City families experienced Golgotha firsthand in a bombing without precedent on American soil. Tomorrow, Holy Thursday, we observe the first anniversary of yet another bitter tragedy, the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton. The people of Oklahoma and Colorado are linked by a common experience of burying the innocent. But we are also linked by our faith in a God who showed us how to love, and now asks us to be agents of His love in a violent world.

We offer these thoughts in that spirit:

The killings in Oklahoma City, Littleton, and elsewhere in the time since, are heartbreaking, but they are not senseless. In a way, they make perfect sense. They are the fruit of a culture which is rapidly losing its reverence for the sanctity of human life and the dignity of other persons. A culture which already ratifies violence through abortion on demand and capital punishment. A culture which methodically erodes its own sense of community by marketing self-absorption in order to fuel sales and profits . . . and then wonders why the result is impatience, leading to anger, leading to more violence.

Art, music, drama, law and architecture are windows on a people's soul. So is advertising. So are video games. So are films and television. Therefore, we must ask: If American young people see 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television before they leave elementary school; if they're offered a steady diet of virtual reality and simulated sex and brutality; if they're told relentlessly that they deserve what they want, right now; and if more than 200 million guns now circulate around the country, why is anyone surprised at the bloodshed?

Without ever intending it, we have created a culture in which community has been displaced by personal consumption; where pre-teens carry guns in their backpacks to protect themselves at school; where the median for teens who receive an allowance is \$50 a week; where TVs and computers can absorb more than five hours of the typical child's day; where only a quarter of our families are intact and "traditional;" where "Choose Life" license plates are attacked for being a political statement against a woman's so-called right to choose; where scientists can map an entire human chromosome but remain ignorant of the secret yearnings of the human heart.

Without ever intending it, we have confused freedom with mere choices, and turned individual rights into a kind of idolatry. Some argue that we need easy access to deadly weapons to guarantee our freedom. This is a lie. Some argue that if we ban pornography and violence from our entertainment media, we undermine the liberties guaranteed by our Constitution. This is an even more cynical falsehood. In fact, we are already unfree — tyrannized by our lack of courage, concern for one another, and common sense. And we are paying the price for this unfreedom with the lives of minority children gunned down in the inner city, middle-class children shot dead in the suburbs, and average citizens murdered by terrorism. The glue holding us together as a nation is coming undone through our own selfishness, and nothing has demonstrated it better than the cover story of a recent Sunday news magazine entitled: "The New American Consensus: Government of, by and for the Comfortable."

But comfort, as we have so bitterly seen, is not safety.

No culture can finally outrun the conflicts in its heart. For Christians, Holy Week is a time to look honestly at our own sinfulness, to repent, to turn to God, and to "choose life" (Deut 30:19). For 200 years, Americans have been a great people, a nation committed to the sanctity and dignity of the human person, born and unborn. It is not too late to be so again — to walk away from a culture of violence and death and to embrace what Pope John Paul II aptly calls the "culture of life" . . . the "civilization of love."

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The families of the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing and the Columbine High School massacre have carried the cross of Jesus Christ as few of us ever will. May we help to give meaning to their suffering by a conversion in our own lives — a conversion which becomes an example and leaven for others, so that our ways join in Christ's way of salvation, which leads to Easter and to life.

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