The Fight for Consciousness

The crisis of evangelization in our time is whether groups of persons following Jesus' way can become successful zones of contestation, disputing the dehumanizing vision of life offered by the consumerist culture we live in and imagining a credible alternative.

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The "crisis of evangelization in our time," for Agape translates into a singular mission of education in Christian Nonviolence, offering "a credible alternative" to a culture drowning in violence. Over the seven year history of Agape's many-faceted missions (this year including for the first time grades 4-6), we have sought to be a "voice in the wilderness" of the "consumerist culture" and its deadening of consciousness and creativity.

FIGHT FOR CONSCIOUSNESS: Despite the "dehumanizing vision" of life in today's popular culture, the heart of Jesus is His message of "No!" to forces of derision, despair and the mentality of siege. For youth, the importance of the nonviolent journey is an affirmation of their uniqueness, loving themselves first, but not stopping there. We urge young people to honor their being as an unrepeatable gift and **not** to measure their worth against the standards of the world—media , rock and sports figures. The fight for consciousness is a holy struggle of enternal significance, calling on a force more powerful than the guns of revenge blasting enemies into nothingness on TV and movie screens across the land. The fight for consciouness of the sacredness of all life implies an active refusal to humiliate or intimidate, to use force or coersion. It means a radical stance of resistance to all that demeans and degrades the uniqueness of individual being in the eyes of God. Such consciousness requires making connections with the culture, being critically aware of the erosion of mercy, love, compassion and forgiveness on the contemporary scene. Such consciousness means a refusal to compartmentalize conscience and to resist the desacralization of life from abortion to capital punishment and armed conflagrations throughout the world.

CRITICAL CONNECTIONS: An essential first question for youth is: How do we treat violently or "violate" our siblings and "enemies" in family, school and neighborhood. Ridiculing, name-calling, rejecting another sacred being by reducing him/her to a "thing" creates outcasts, those among whom Jesus was counted and whom He defended. Such connecting and interior journeying yields deeply perceptive responses such as that of Rebecca Connolly, a Hudson Catholic High School sophomore (Hudson, Ma.) who wrote during an Agape retreat:

Outcasts, what are they? Are they the homeless, the druggies, the criminals? Or are they ourselves, hiding behind masks to protect ourselves. We probably meet many outcasts in our lives. I know because in a way, I am one. I'm shy, I don't wear the latest fashions and people are always making fun of me.

Artwork by Hudson Catholic High School student, Hudson, MA

If we succeed in reducing our friends and family members to zeroes, what is it easier to do to them, and by extension to others, out there, in the hostile world? The media glares its response at our youth daily, portraying murder and revenge as virtue, such as in this ad for Rambo III; "The first was for himself. The second was for his country. This time it's to save his friend."

University of Wisconsin social historian Stan Schultz issues an ominous warning: *We're convinced that we can't affect public policy and we've lost control of our kids, so we abide by the law of the Roman Circus½ a little blood here, a little sex there, and most people will be happy."*

The cheapening of the sacred, sensationalism for sell, defilement and derision of human life in slasher movies such as **Friday the 13th** and **Nightmare on Elm Street** are directly connected to two recent Massachusetts murders and "are particular favorites of chillren aged 11 to 13. Both feature grisly scenes of violence against passive victims and one of them is the basis for a television show 'Freddy's Dreams'." (Boston Globe, Dec. 19, 1989).

What then is the challenge for Christian parents and educators amidst this assault on consciousness of the sacred? Minimally, we must help youth make connections between the rising tide of homicide and suicide among young people and the media "sell" of violence. Many students passionately defend media violence as "just entertainment," some asserting that it's just another way of "making a living." Yet, consider the recent stabbing death of Jerome Johnson, star athlete at South High School in Worcester, Massachusetts by a fellow student. Does gratuitous violence in movies either desensitize us to the consequences of violence or provide us with an illlusory "way out" of our conflicts?

What if these two fueding teenagers and those who witnessed the murder had learned nonviolent conflict resolution in school, from their CCD instructors, heard from their church pulpits the Christian tradition of nonviolence as the embodiment of the life and teachings of Jesus? Would two lives have been saved? What if the teachers and parents of South High School students now united with church and community leaders to endorse the teaching of nonviolence in the school?

We must join the fight for consciousness with our emphatic and

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resounding rejection of this assault on the sacredness of life by demanding curriculum revision in at least our Catholic Schools or those of our particular faith tradition to include the church teachings and tradition of nonviolence. We must begin to make our voices heard, lifting the cries of victims and victimizers everywhere: **Violence sells! We're not buying!**

A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE: A high school junior at Turner Carroll High in Buffalo, New York's tense inner city environs states the difficulty of a choice for truth and freedom: *If I follow the nonviolent path, I'll probably be an outcast. The nonviolent path is a minority of people and people don't seem to accept them as much as they would a person who fought."*

Becoming nonviolent entails the possibility of physical and psychological injury, but so does violence. So why not choose the path that taps into the power of God, a creative alternative to the unreflective herd mentality of the easy way, a way that robs us of choice, courage and the basic human instinct for affirmation, service, life?

Can we educators, parents and people committed to gospel values of reconciliation create for our youth "zones of liberation" (Warren) from old myths about nonviolence being passive and wimpy? Jesus doesn't invite us to a journey of complacency or comfort in cultural norms. He urges the often painful freedom of truth and confrontation with darkness.

ZONES OF CONTESTATION: 20 million captive American homes provide Nintendo Entertainment System with a 2 billion dollar profit. For males between the ages of 8-15, the effects of Nintendo are "powerful in their bloody-mined little psyches. ... nurturing a 'warrior instinct that in another culture would have set them out on the hunt or warpath.' ...Karate kicks, maces and swords...simple bludgeoning. ...slaughter a gang of muggers before they can toss you onto the subway tracts. ... the body count by the end of Double Dragon is at least 50; the final victim is the hero's own brother whom he murders to avenge the theft of his girlfriend." **(Newsweek,** March 6, 1989).

"Youth held in New York rape reportedly call attack 'fun.' The murder victim, a 28 year old Wall Street investment banker whose skull was fractured ... remained in a coma yesterday." **(Boston Globe,** 4/24/89).

A junior at Northwest Catholic High School in West Hartford, Ct. writes: *"Violence enters my life in many ways. I see it on TV and movies, on the streets of Hartford and in school. I mostly think of violence as entertaining, but I wouldn't like to be the center of it. I admit, I like to see fighting and enjoy watching it. I usually like to cheer it on. I know I am wrong."*

Young people exploited by media moguls represent purchasing power of over 40 billion dollars in a year. How do we challenge our youth to "contest" the "dehumanizing vision of life offered by the consumerist culture" without hardening our hearts and theirs towards the hucksters of violence and thereby encouraging hatred and suspicion of adults in the process?

We sense in school after school, program after program that the hearts of young people will open, though like all of us, not all at once, to this revolutionary gospel of reconciliation. But we must begin somewhere and why not with the Truth, confirming their own internal cravings for goodness, for generosity and service, cravings they are all too often afraid to express or acknowledge for fear of ridicule or rejection. Our schools and families should be laboratories of experimentation in Christian Nonviolence.

Nothing less than total commitment to our own conversions as adults, to becoming evangelizers of nonviolence in an age of contempt will do. We must preach nonviolence, teach nonviolence, practice nonviolence without abandoning the dehumanizers and those dehumanized. Our collective conversion should entail the urgency of creating networks of support in family, school, church and community for those committed to this fight for consciousness, offering it as an exciting and creative venture in truth-seeking.

The mission is often an exhausting one, and culturally, the odds are staggeringly against the message. The funding for such evangelization in this time of crisis is close to nonexistent. But, the hunger for connecting on the deepest levels of being burns in the eyes and even in the words of discouragement and despair of youth, teachers and administrators with whom we work. We sense together that this is a transforming time to be a Christian, a time of darkness, a time of truth, one that compels countless, and most often, nameless educators, administrators, and young people whom we have been graced to meet on this journey to act with vision and commitment. Such actions out of darkness represent a choice of *"what the world considers nonsense...what the world considers weak... looks down upon and despises and thinks is nothing."* (1 Cor.26). We choose *"Christ to be our wisdom,"* and become beings shining *"as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life."* (Phil. 2:16).

This word of life radiates from the summation of an Agape retreat by Emily Cataldo, age 16, of Hudson Catholic High School:

"It is this power that will overcome our insecurities in our violent world which we created. our heart contains the capacity to love, hate, trust, be compassionate and sensitive as well as other unique and special qualities which make each and everyone of us different. Each of us must decide for themselves what they will do with these qualities and where they are headed in the world."

By Suzanne Belote Shanley

The fight for consciousness is a holy struggle of eternal signifigance, calling on a force more powerful than the guns of revenge blasting enemies into nothingness on TV and movie screens across the land.