

COMING TO "TERMS" ABOUT VIOLENCE
Michael H. Crosby, OFMCap.

Introduction

The time between August, 1994 and the CMSM Assembly of 1995 may be remembered as the year we "discovered" violence as a disease in the United States. In 1992, the former Surgeon General of the United States, C. Everett Koop declared that "violence in American was . . . a public health emergency."¹ However his warning went unheeded. Even when President Clinton said that violence must be included in any effort to create an unified approach to health, many did not know what he was talking about.

Now this is no longer the case. Few today will deny we now face an "unrelenting epidemic of violence in America."² Still we are stymied to find systemic ways to begin healing our nation's sickness. One reason may be a reluctance to examine the root reasons for the disease. Another may be that we've been over-exposed to headlines and CNN in a way tht has made us immune or psychically numb. Yet, medical organizations have begun sounding a call to do something about it.

The American Medical Association described its presence in the society in terms of a national sickness. It developed a "National Report Card on Violence" to quantify and qualify the status of violence in the U.S. This "report card" assesses the "pervasiveness and the sociological forces that continue to influence violence in the U.S., and attempts to ascertain Americans' awareness and response to the current pandemic of violence."³ The nation received an "overall 'D' which reflects the average of grades assigned to the following four categories:" family violence (spousal/partner abuse, elder abuse, child physical/sexual abuse, and suicide) = c-; sexual assault (sexual assault, acquaintance rape and spousal rape) = d-; public violence (gang violence, gun violence, civil violence and drug violence) = F; virtual violence (television violence, music violence, film violence, video violence, computer and Cyberspace violence) = D. A JAMA article declared that "the epidemic of intentional injury continues to be a leading cause of premature death in America," especially in poor and minority communities.⁴

¹ C. E. Koop and G. D. Lundberg, "Violence in America: A Public Health Emergency: Time to Bite the Bullet Back," JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association), 267 (1992), 3075-3076.

² Phil B. Fontanarosa, MD, Editorial, "The Unrelenting Epidemic of Violence in America: Truths and Consequences," JAMA 273, 22 (June 14, 1995), 1792 - 1793. The issue of JAMA containing Dr. Fontanarosa's editorial featured a series of articles on problems related to interpersonal violence.

³ Press Release, American Medical Association, "American Medical Association's Report Card on Violence in America," June 13, 1995, 1.

⁴ Commentary, "National Medical Association Surgical Section Position Paper on Violence Prevention," Journal of the American Medical Association 273, 22 (June 14, 1995), 1788-1789.

For their part, the U.S. Bishops have made a serious effort to "Confront the Culture of Violence" in this nation. On the part of CMSM, a turning point in awareness of its role in the society and its culture of violence came with Gerald Brown's 1994 Assembly Address to the members: "Ministry of Religious in Violent Times."⁵

While extended discussions have taken place probing the nature and nurturing of violence in the U.S., this paper will be a modest attempt to offer some introductory ideas related to three critical dimensions of violence: its definition, its dynamics, and its various expressions.

If one of the core elements related to religious life is its ability to "read the signs of the times," it would be appropriate if we deepen our own awareness of violence and its ways of violating not only individuals and families, nor as it impacts communities and peoples, but as it will effect the planet itself.

Defining Violence

In this section I want to define violence and find its links to other notions, especially control and abuse.

Most things I've read on violence seem to presume that, because we are inundated with it, we all know what it means. However, I believe that, before we can discuss how we might respond to the all-pervasiveness of violence in our environment (be this in politics and economics, the media or the church, or whatever), we need to have a common understanding of it. In this conviction, I offer a simple definition. Violence is "any force that inflicts injury." This definition has three elements: 1) it represents any force; 2) because it "inflicts" injury, the assumption is that it is invasive and, to that degree, unwanted; and 3) the force inflicts "injury." The "force" as well as the "injury" can be physical or mental, individual or corporate, psychological or sociological, concrete or ideological, religious or spiritual, etc.

In elaborating on this definition, it seems we should be placing more stress on the "force" that inflicts the injury rather than the other two dimensions. This keeps us concentrated on the cause as we have to attend to the impact and effect.

1) Violence is a force. There are different forms of force. It can represent energy, strength, or the "capacity" to cause change. It is expressed in exertion against resistance. It can have an intellectual component as in the "force of an idea." It also applies to a body of people organized for a purpose; thus we have business forces as well as armed forces. We talk about the "force of law" or a vector quantity that accelerates a body in some direction. Woven throughout these strands describing "force," however, is the common thread of power. All force represents some kind of power as well as

⁵ Father Gerald Brown/CMSM, "Ministry of Religious in Violent Times," Origins 24 (1994), 195, 197-200.

its use or abuse. Thus, if violence represents a force, it cannot be separated from the negative use or abuse of power. This leads us to examine the notion of power itself.

Power represents the "ability to influence." Since power always has a subject and object, it represents someone's or something's ability to influence another. If power involves some kind of influence on another or others, the stress is not on these, but on the source: the influence itself. In itself power is neutral. The issue of power in its relation to force is how that power is used, how the influence is exercised.

There are two poles around which power is exercised: a positive and a negative expression. Positive power occurs through affirmation and nurturing, as when elders use their influence on children for the latter's betterment. Power is exercised positively when we challenge or correct others' for their betterment, especially when it flows from affirmation and nurturing. Negative power occurs through exploitation and manipulation, coercion and domination. In exploitation influence is used in ways that injure others who are aware of this abuse. This would be the case of the way the leaders of the Peoples' Republic of China deal with their dissidents or many brothel owners in New York City treat their prostitutes who have come to this country seeking freedom. Manipulation occurs when the victim is unaware of the influence, as in advertising and other subtler uses of language. Coercion and domination take place when people in power use it in a way to "keep people in their place."

When power is used positively, it reflects care for the other. When it gets expressed negatively, it manifests control. Control -- which too often has been equated with power cannot be equated with power (which is neutral); it can only be understood as the negative use of power. As such control undermines the possibility of care in a relationship (since care is the positive use of power). At the same time it undermines the possibility of freedom in the one who exercises it and, often, in the object of one's control.

Control represents not only the negative use of power, but its abuse. Thus the United States' Bishops asked in their document on domestic violence, what is "abuse?" Responding to their own inquiry, they offered one of the best definitions of abuse I have read. Although they seemed to limit their definition of abuse only to its domestic expression they said: "It is any kind of behavior that one . . . uses to control another through fear and intimidation."⁶

If violence represents "any force that inflicts injury," the force it represents will not only be negative; it will be exercised through a negative use of power itself. The control that this represents will also reveal abuse in one form or another. Consequently, violence will always be a manifestation of control and abuse. Both are destructive uses of power.

2) Violence is a force that "inflicts" injury. When power is used in a way that "inflicts" something on someone or something, the power is imposed in some way. Thus we speak of "inflicting" pain or punishment on something or someone. When something is inflicted, it

⁶ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "When I Call for Help: Domestic Violence against Women," Origins 22 (1991), 355.

creates a burden on the recipient. It is uninvited and unwelcomed; it is boundary-invasive and penetrative; it is undefensible and unpleasant. What is inflicted is forced. To inflict is to afflict; thus we come to the third part of our brief definition of violence, the notion of injury.

3. Violence is any force that inflicts "injury." We all know what injury involves: pain of some sort. Where there is injury there is harm, hurt, damage, distress, and loss. Where there is injury there will be wounds. Just as the source of violence (ie, force) has different manifestations, so will its consequences. These can range from individual and institutional injuries to physical and mental to religious and spiritual, and many others as well. Whatever the expression of the force, it will undermine the health of the one(s) upon whom the force is inflicted.

Unfortunately, we discover, the injury that is inflicted by the infliction of force on one often becomes the force that inflicts violence on others. This makes it necessary for us to discuss violence in its various dynamics.

The Dynamics of Violence

A problem in addressing violence as U.S. Catholic Christians is that both the Western form of the Church which is ours as well as our nation have been linked with sanctioned (and therefore, by extension, "made holy") violence. The church was used by expansionist states at the time of colonization as a legitimizing "force" which inflicted injury on many people, be they Native peoples or enslaved peoples.

When I was in seminary and in the years after, I often wondered why a church with as broad a theology as ours had developed a very comprehensive theological system around sin, but never anything well-defined around violence. And then I discovered that the institutional church had been on the "side" of violence. It never had to address its implications until it discovered its members as those who had been injured by the infliction of the force of the colonizers and their chaplains.

The all-pervasiveness of violence that we perceive surrounding us in the 1990s, be it in our cities or our churches, or in our Bosnias or backyards, has only been seriously addressed in a fuller fashion, I believe, in this generation. We have known-well the "what" of violence. Only now are we examining the "why."

One of the best to show its omnipresence has been Rene Girard. His writings on "violence" and the "sacred" have only recently been seriously discussed. One of the best applications of his theory to the U.S. reality can be found in Gil Bailie's 1995 Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads.

In Girard's research on anthropology, he discovered in humans and their interpersonal relationships at all levels, but especially at the collective level, the role violence plays in traditional religion ("archaic religion") and the resulting role religion itself can play in sustaining cultures built on violence. While we might be shocked today that violence is epidemic in our culture, Girard has found it to be endemic to all cultures.

As cultures decline or find themselves disintegrating they resort to violence. But when they create themselves as well, they do the same. In the process religion often provides the myth succeeding generations will use to make holy (= sanction) the violence. This is

done through the blaming mechanism. The means to accomplish this is the scapegoat.

Girard's basic theory about the dynamics of violence can be described in a series of steps. 1) Human beings not only desire to be like others; when they are jealous of these others they move into "mimetic" forms of desire. The mimetic form of desire is the desire to not only have what the other has but to be what the other is ("you will be like God"). 2) This original sin of mimetic desire leads to mimetic rivalry and competition. Conflict arises because both want the same thing. 3) When the limited reality desired is coveted by the two competing powers or forces, the previous social order that enabled order in relationships diminishes. 4) The only way for the increasingly disintegrating situation to get reordered is through a mechanism by which both competing entities can find some external referent upon which they can place their hostilities. 5) Finding a scapegoat (somebody "other" than the two), both groups work together to eliminate it by exclusion, preferably by killing. This resolves the crisis. 6) Now able to live together and possibly cooperate and even be reconciled, the "death" of the scapegoat becomes the point of identity and ritual celebration for the once-competing groups. In Girard's schema, violence thus not only creates religion; it is celebrated through it. In the case of the scapegoat we know as Jesus Christ, it was better that one should die than that the whole system be destroyed. In the whole process of identifying themselves with the scapegoat the perpetrators end up not really knowing what they are doing: thus Jesus' "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

When violence becomes endemic in a culture its victims become its collaborators, the abused become perpetrators. So the Jewish leaders (symbolized in Annas and Caiaphas) and the Roman leaders (working through Pilate) could collaborate with each other to save each other from the people by finding a common scapegoat. It is all done unconsciously with increasing complexity until the perpetrators no longer know what they are doing.⁷

According to Girard: "The sentence that defines the unconscious persecutor" within each of us as well as our institutions and our culture "lies at the very heart of the Passion story in the gospel of Luke: 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34)." He concludes:

If we are to restore to this sentence its true savor we must recognize its almost technical role in the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. It says something precise about men gathered together by their scapegoat. They do not know what they are doing. That is why they must be pardoned. This is not dictated by a persecution complex or by the desire to remove from our sight the horror of real violence. In this passage we are given the first definition of the unconscious in human history, that form which all the others originate and develop in weaker form."⁸

⁷ Michael H. Crosby, The Seven Last Words (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 37.

⁸ Rene Girard, The Scapegoat, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore:

In his Violence Uncovered, Gil Bailie writes of Girard's theory of the scapegoat: "In my view, Girard has made the most sweeping and significant intellectual breakthrough of the modern age. . . . Suffice it to say that Girard has uncovered the role violence plays in archaic religion and the role these religious systems play in human culture."⁹

While religion often has served to sustain cultural violence, religion also has served as the liberator of violence. However, the times when it has moved best from being part of the oppression to being part of the liberation has been when it has eschewed violence in the form of repentance and/or forgiveness. As East-West politics seemed to have had a hand in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II, what created hope for many was the way he visited the man who tried to kill him in order to forgive him. A related parallel came when, in June, 1995, the Pope called on the various banking entities to forgive the debts (in a monetary way) of those countries indebted to them.

The Expressions of Violence

One of the formative "forces" that affected my understanding of violence came in my first five years of ministry (1968-1973) in a "changing" parish in Milwaukee. Here I was forced to move beyond the anger and fear of the white people as black people moved into the neighborhood to uncover the deeper cause of the violence that seemed all pervasive: the politicians who refused to pass "open housing" legislation, the realtors and land speculators who "capitalized" on the social demographics, and the church which (at its institutional level) remained virtually silent.

As we marched for open housing, I wondered why the police were not "defending" us against the system of discrimination and rather was "protecting" the property of the monied interests. Why didn't they stand with us as against us? "Whose side are you on" was a song that didn't just ask individuals to make a choice; it revealed the fissures in the system itself. At the same time I wondered why so many in my family became alienated from me. Now I was "with them" and "they" were threatening the system that had nourished us white people. While one group concerned itself with those throwing stones, I was among those more concerned about the system that kept so many people from working in the stone quarries or using stones to build their homes in places where they chose. The whole dynamic led me to ask questions related to individual and institutional violence.

Around this time I read Thomas Merton's **Faith and Violence**. He put into words the two main manifestations of violence that remain at

Johns Hopkins University, 1986), 37, 38.

⁹ Gil Bailie, Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads (New York: Crossroads, 1955), 4, 6. As to the significance of Bailie's book itself, the publishers of the Catholic Book Club stated as to why they chose Bailie's for their April, 1995 selection: When Michael Leach at Crossroad first sent us a bound galley copy of Violence Unveiled . . . he remarked that "this just might be the most important book I've ever published." Se thought he must be exaggerating. He was not."

the heart of our consideration of its various forms. Again, as in the poles of power, there are poles in violence: at one end is the individual; at the other is the institutional:

The real moral issue of violence in the twentieth century is obscured by archaic and mythical presuppositions. We tend to judge violence in terms of the individual, the messy, the physically disturbing, the personally frightening. The violence we want to see restrained is the violence of the hood waiting for us in the subway or the elevator. That is reasonable, but it tends to influence us too much. It makes us think that the problem of violence is limited to this very small scale, and it makes us unable to appreciate the far greater problem of the more abstract, more global, more organized presence of violence on a massive and corporate pattern. Violence today is white-collar violence, the systematically organized bureaucratic and technological destruction of man.¹⁰

In the late 60s, when I read Merton's paragraph, his polarity approach appealed to the "either-or" thinking that dominated my perspective. Now, while I believe things are not quite so simple, I must admit his basic insight still affects my underlying notion of violence, especially when we consider it as a pathology affecting the entire nation. This became quite apparent to me the day after what now simply is called "Oklahoma City."

I attended Kimberly-Clark's annual meeting in Dallas on the proxy of the Redemptorists of the Midwest Province. They had filed a shareholder proposal calling on the Company to "spin off" its tobacco-related operations which realized \$404 million in annual sales of the Company. We had argued that tobacco sales belied the Company's image as a maker of products related to health and hygiene, such as Kleenex, Kotex, and Huggies.

We began the meeting, at the suggestion of the CEO, with a moment of silence to remember who died in the violence of the bombing in Oklahoma City. When it was time for me to speak, I recalled the time we took to remember those who died in that violence. But I also said something like, "I can't help but think that yesterday over 1000 people died in this country alone as a result of smoking cigarettes. And this Company was involved in their deaths. We cannot forget them nor our involvement in their death as well."

The deaths in Oklahoma City can be attributed to the form of violence Merton described as "physically disturbing, the personally frightening;" Kimberly-Clark's, on the other hand, represented the "systemically organized bureaucratic" destruction of people in an economic system that sanctions putting profits before people, the bottom line of money before human life itself.

In my mind, any discussion of violence in this country will be incomplete without a fuller grasp of the underlying causes that are to be found in the economic system in which we live. The specific form of materialism manifest in our form of capitalism has been

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1968), 5-6.

called by Pope John Paul II "savage."¹¹ You cannot get much more violent than being called "savage."

When he announced for the presidency, Senator Robert Dole had intimated something savage (at least from my interpretation!) may lay beneath many of today's entertainment forms when he said: "Society pays a price when the entertainment industry poisons the minds of our young people. We must hold Hollywood accountable for putting profit ahead of common decency."¹² Later, he moved away from this foray into social analysis and, instead, pointed his finger (selectively) at movie stars and Warner Brothers. He isolated these as perpetrators of violence. His remarks brought almost immediate response; he had touched a raw nerve in the U.S. psyche.

In a column generated by Bob Dole's remarks, the columnist David Broder returned to elaborate on the underlying violence that can be found in the violence endemic to the very economic system that sustains our culture and political economy. He noted that Senatore Dole had been quite selective in highlighting just one industry that placed profits before people. He even quoted from the new Catechism of the Catholic Church which states: "Those responsible for business enterprises are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations. They have an obligation to consider the good of persons and not only the increase of profits."¹³

I have attended many shareholder meetings of Corporate America, especially those of tobacco companies. There I've often marvelled at how shareholders can unite in a common rejection of those presenting resolutions which they fear may affect their "bottom line." Their "if you don't like it, sell the stock" approach represents a contemporary manifestations of scapegoating. With this in mind, I cannot help but paraphrase Senator Dole's earlier remarks about the media and apply them to the tobacco companies (and to whatever in our economic system places profits over people): "Society pays a price when the tobacco industry poisons the bodies of our young people. We must hold Tobacco Row accountable for putting profit ahead of common decency."

In today's corporate culture, you would be uncouth, however, if you would say such a thing. Such a hard saying would be considered too violent and abrasive. I find it interesting that some Catholics will promote a boycott of Disney because of its movie, "Priest," is considered vicious, yet I heard no Catholic voice raised when Disney's Chairman, Michael D. Eisner, made \$203,010,590 in 1993 or \$78,081 an hour¹⁴ even as Disney cut jobs of its hourly workers. We don't seem to be able to make the connections between the corporate violence that comes from loss of jobs in one place and the

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, quoted by Jas Gawronski, La Stampa, Milwaukee Sentinel, November 2, 3, 4, 1993.

¹² Senator Robert Dole, in David S. Broder, "Decency vs. Profits," The Boston Globe, June 12, 1995.

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoted in Broder, Ibid.

¹⁴ John A. Byrne, "That Eye-Popping Executive Pay: Is Anybody Worth This Much?", Business Week, April 25, 1994, 52.

exploitation of workers in Mexico hit with the devaluation of the peso. We read in *The San Francisco Chronicle*: "Layoffs Called One of the Biggest Causes of Violent Behavior"¹⁵ and then don't see the underlying violence, not only in the title, but in the dynamics behind another headline in a 1995 edition of *Latin [America] Finance*: "Invasion of the Multinationals."¹⁶

Noting the connections between the individual and interpersonal levels of violence and their connection to the institutional and infrastructural levels, I do not want to end this discussion of the expressions of violence without considering a bit more deeply the role of ideology.

In our nation there is a "Republican" way of thinking as well as a "Democratic" approach to issues, including those discussed in the above paragraphs. The former tends to concentrate on the individual and group deviations from the norm without much consideration of the systemic issues; the latter stresses the need for structural changes without sufficiently stressing matters of personal responsibility. When one is expressed to the exclusion of the other that way of thinking becomes ideological.

In my mind, ideology now overly-defines political discourse in U.S. life; in the process it also has been cloaked in moral righteousness. Now God gets used to promote a certain political and economic agenda that alienates one group against another. So we argue whether those taking more from the economy are welfare queens in the inner city or welfare kings whose PAC contributions to politicians ensure their entitlements. We ask which prisons are more needed: for those committing crime in the streets or crime in the suites. We worry about arms sales abroad but seem unaware of our tobacco killing many more. The consequence of this, depending on your ideological position is to find one form of violence okay or even "good" while the other is "bad." We condemn the one and close our eyes to the other.

One person's or group's thug is another's opportunist. Thus, with the urban incidents of the late 60s in Watts, Detroit, and Newark, or the aftermath of the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles, the violence will be a "riot" or an "insurrection," depending on your ideology. The justification to take up arms in urban areas against the police has its echoes in the militias' obsession about the Second Amendment. Both justify their position as protecting themselves from government "intrusion" -- ie, violence.

Now we reap the consequences of being, systemically, a culture of violence. Bailie notes that the result is that the once "necessary asymmetry between 'good' and 'bad' violence is breaking down. Unless and until the world comes to grips with that fact, the catastrophes of the twentieth century will have taught us nothing, and they will be but the prelude to greater ones in the twenty-first."¹⁷

I believe that the only way to try to confront this violence and

¹⁵ Don Lattin: "Layoffs Called One of the Biggest Causes of Violent Behavior," *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 16, 1994.

¹⁶ "Invasion of the Multinationals," *Latin Finance* 68 (1995), 21ff.

¹⁷ Bailie, *Ibid.*, 63-64.

to offer an alternative to it will occur when we who represent the force of religion refuse to be silent as more violence is used to address the old violence. This demands that we find an entirely new role for religion. This new way of confronting the violence in, among, and around us we be examined in our discussion on "The Spirituality of Non-Violence."

Notes