

“Ecce, Lazarus!”
Where There is No Vision,
The People Perish

By Rev. Emmanuel Charles McCarthy

Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily armed robbers, or is it an awakening?

— Thomas Merton

Since at least the early hours of the 20th Century sociologists have pointed out that the dominant operating value system in a society is the value system that promotes the interests of the dominant class of the society. An operating value system is by definition what people value, that is what they experience as worthwhile, important, or meaningful to think, to say or to do.

An argument can be made that all human beings are given the capacity to know what is truly and objectively of value in this life. But whether or not this is an accurate appraisal of human potentiality at birth, what is clear is that this capacity can be easily impeded, undermined or manipulated by the process of nurturing. The famous lines from the musical “South Pacific,” pretty much sum-up the problem at the heart of all societal value systems:

*You’ve got to be taught
 before it’s too late,
 before you are six or seven or eight,
 to hate all the people your relatives hate,
 you’ve got to be carefully taught.*



The real moral problems (of violence) are not to be located in the rare instances of hand-to-hand combat, but in the remote planning and organization of technological destruction.

employed to serve the interests of some people — and not to serve the interests of other people.

Inculturation

The problem which the Christian faces throughout this value-implanting and value-maintaining process is presented clearly in the vignette of the man who believed deeply in the Trinity but who considered black people to be sub-human — mere commodities to be bought and sold, used or abused according to one’s disposition at the moment. What obviously has taken place in this scenario is that this man’s church nurtured him very effectively in belief in the value of the Holy Trinity. However, it orchestrated that nurturing in a way that makes belief in the Trinity morally compatible with

Societal systems of value or worth are transmitted to the individual through society’s institutions: familial, educational, religious, media, governmental, economic, etc. What these various groupings of people communicate by word and deed to the individual — starting in infancy and continuing until death — as important, or as significant, is what the individual normally considers being of worth. And what these institutions devalue, either explicitly or by inattention, the individual normally devalues. This societal process of inculcating values and non-values in the individual is universally

and supportive of a simultaneous nurturing in racism.

The valuation-devaluation nurturing process starts in the family cradle and is developed and reinforced through all the other institutions of society. Unless there is a strenuous effort to neutralize it or to oppose it, it will envelope the person like air. Then, what is merely nurtured will appear as natural as breathing. This in a nutshell is the overwhelming spiritual, theological, moral and pastoral problem the Church encounters as it tries to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a multiplicity of cultures and countries. Over a period of only a few generations of inculturation the Church in any society can become — unless it is extremely vigilant — a value-nurturing institution, that begins to “baptize” as Christian, secular values, attitudes and beliefs that are radically incompatible with the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

A contemporary example of where the Catholic Church — not necessarily all Christian Churches — has avoided becoming a nurturing agent for a secular value contrary to the teachings of Jesus is abortion. With all the converting, communicating, persuading power at its disposal, it has made available to its people an awareness — cognitive and emotional — of the evil of abortion, as well as, a supportive atmosphere in which to further nurture this awareness and the commitment to struggle against the destruction of God’s little ones *in utero*.

However, there is another most grave evil, every bit as culturally embedded in U.S. society as abortion, which the Catholic Church and most other Christian Churches in the United States have not only ignored for all practical purpose, but have “baptized” by large scale inattention and by minimalist efforts to oppose it. Indeed, granting the enormity of the human destruction involved and the wholesale participation of Catholics and other Christians in it, it can be said that the Churches of the United States are now part of a nurturing process that explicitly minimizes, if not outright supports, a rampaging evil of the most sinister order.

A Virulent Plague

Of what evil am I speaking? Let us return to the Second Vatican Council, to *Gaudium et Spes* Article 18, “The arms race is a virulent plague (*gravissimam plagam*) on humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.” Of what evil am I speaking? Let us harken to the 1972 statement on disarmament that Pope Paul VI sent to the United Nations: “The armaments race is to be condemned unreservedly. It is in itself an act of aggression which amounts to a crime, for even when they are not used, by their cost alone, armaments kill the poor.” Of what evil am I speaking? In referring to what he calls “the insane arms race”, Pope John Paul II states: “If arms production is a grave disorder (*gravis est rerum perturbatio*) in the present world with regards to true human needs and the employment of the means capable of satisfying these needs, the arms trade is equally to blame. Indeed with reference to the latter it must be added that the *moral judgment is even more severe* (emphasis in the original). This is the evil of which I am speaking and which I am claiming the U.S. Churches are nurturing by their “laissez faire” disposition toward it.

In a gem of a book, *Faith and Violence*, the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, exposes the problem with exceptional clarity:

“The real moral problems (of violence) are not to be located in the rare instances of hand-to-hand combat but in the remote planning and organization of technological destruction. Modern technological mass murder is not directly visible, like individual murder. It is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilt feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate. It is this polite, massively organized white-collar murder machine that threatens the world with destruction, not the violence of a few desperate teenagers in the slums. But our antiquated theology myopically focused on individual violence alone fails to see this. It shudders at the phantasm of muggings and killings where a mess is made on our doorstep, but blesses and canonizes the antiseptic violence of corporately organized murder because it is respectable, efficient, clean, and above all profitable.”

This is the “virulent plague”, the anti-Gospel value system, of which the Churches of the U.S. have become spiritual nurturers. Let us not be pragmatically foolish. An occasional hand-wringing paragraph or two in a pastoral letter is no match for the gargantuan mind-controlling operation that mass media places in the hands of the most profitable business on the planet — the selling of instruments of human destruction.

1 is greater than 51

But, why single out U.S. Churches and their leadership on this matter. Certainly other countries manufacture and sell weapons? Indeed they do. Therefore, Churches and Church leadership in those countries should also be made aware of how they are allowing themselves to become silent partners in nurturing the moral validity of anti-Gospel values and activities. But, there is one overwhelming fact that requires indicting U.S. Churches and their leaders in this matter above all others. **That fact is not just that the United States is the number #1 arms exporter in the world. It is that, of the 52 arms-exporting nations, the United States sells more weapons abroad than the other 51 combined.** The epicenter of this “*gravissimam plagam*” is the United States.

Diligent Work and the Hierarchy of Values

For U.S. bishops, priests and ministers to continue to speak eloquently on the traditional Trinitarian formula, or to struggle with the issue of whether people should stand or kneel during the Eucharistic Prayer, or to robustly oppose calling a legally enforceable agreement between two homosexuals a marriage contract instead of a civil union contract is not in itself an intrinsically invalid use of Christian time. However, there is a hierarchy of values in the Church that is supposed to conform to the hierarchy of values in the mind of Christ. Mercy and the prophetic condemning of grave evil that has become normalized in the Church are right at the top of that list. To give priority in the expenditure of time, mind and money to values far down the priority ladder from these is a serious evasion of elementary pastoral responsibility and is therefore negligent shepherding.

Diligent work on trivia can be a conscience-pacifying

gimmick. It can be a betrayal of the grace of office, if it is an avoidance technique for not dealing with a virulent plague of pandemic proportions, which is spiritually diseasing souls in one's flock and physically destroying bodies outside one's flock. The child abuse situation in the Church makes this transparently obvious. No one ever suggested that the bishops and priests, who were grossly morally negligent for not addressing the problem over decades, were not hard workers and had not done other good things. They were excoriated for mis-prioritizing their moral and pastoral responsibilities.

In his Encyclical *Sollicitudoe Rei Socialis*, John Paul II makes clear that "The condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelization in the social field which is an aspect of the Church's prophetic role." Naming evil "evil" is not an option in the life of the Church or its leadership. Where a grave evil in which Church memberships is deeply involved and supportive — if only by indifference — is left unnamed, the time for a thorough Episcopal and ecclesial examination of conscience has arrived.

The U.S. Church knows how to fight evil and how to extract itself from any possibility of being even inadvertently a nurturing agent for anti-Gospel value systems and operations. The abortion issue makes this clear. That it has not expended such efforts on behalf of the "anawim", God's poor, outside the United States who are destroyed in numbers that daily dwarf the numbers killed in the World Trade Center, by an arms race centered in the United States, is puzzling, disquieting — and more.

Human Solidarity and the Status Quo

This absence of moral and pastoral vigor on the part of the U.S. Church leadership strongly suggests a Church more tribal than catholic — a Church for whom human solidarity in the one family of the Father is secondary to nationalistic allegiance or economic advantage. It suggests a Church without an operational vision beyond the latitude and longitude of its national borders. It suggests a Church that has lost sight of the proper demarcation line between Church and state. It suggests a Church that is nurtured and is nurturing its people to see life through the eyes of dominant predators, rather than, through the eye of their prey. It suggests a Church of privileged leadership and laity that seem unaware of the Catholic moral imperative that John Paul II calls that "special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian love...the love of preference for the poor." Finally, on a planet where one person dies every nine seconds from starvation — the majority of whom are children — it suggests a Church that has "baptized" the value system of the dominant class, thereby assuring that the fruits of the earth will continue to be used and divided according to the rules of the *status quo* — the very same rules that created and that propagate to this day this "virulent plague."

In Albert Camus', *The Plague*, Dr. Rieux says: "All I maintain is that on this earth there are plagues, and there are victims, and it is up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the plagues." Not to act with the power one has to act to stop a plague is to join forces with the plague. Not to act with the power one has to act in the midst of a spreading "virulent plague" is the clearest of statements that one is refusing to see the plague from

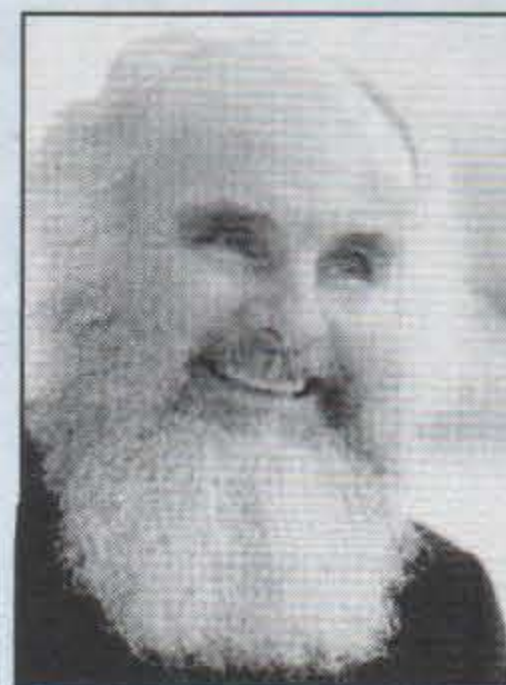
the perspective of its victims, that one is rejecting solidarity with those who do not at the moment serve the interests of the taken-for-granted dominant value system of the society.

Perhaps it is time for the bishops, priests and ministers of the U.S. Church to cease thinking and responding out of that value system. Perhaps it time for them to stand up and say with Gospel confidence and courage:

Since it is the problem of child abuse that this society is profoundly interested in, let us talk child abuse. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that is done in this society abuses children — destroys them physically, emotionally, psychologically, morally, and spiritually — more than our participation in and our nurturing of the arms race. It is an unassailable fact of grotesque proportions — not opinion — that the sale of U.S. arms to the various countries of the world — especially hundreds of billion of dollars of sales to Third World countries — is the cause of perpetual and ever — escalating child abuse around the world. Therefore, let us together begin to see the tens of millions of children with broken bodies and minds that are produced yearly by this "virulent plague" emanating from the United States. If the agenda of this society is to reveal and stop child abuse — and not something else — then let's roll up our sleeves and begin to work together with all deliberate speed to end the most rabid form of child abuse on this planet — the United States led arms race.

"Ecce, Lazarus !"

If U.S. Church leadership cannot find the consciousness or the conscience to stand-up on behalf of God's little ones *post-utero* with the same zeal with which it has stood — up on behalf of God's little ones *in utero*, then perhaps it is time for ordinary Christians from around the world, for fellow members of the Body of Christ, to contact U.S. bishops, priests, and ministers and ask them to awaken and look out the window. Perhaps it is time to help them see, not the mystical intricacies of the hypostatic union, not the proper observance of the protocols of ritual, but Lazarus! Lazarus made Lazarus by what is taking place in full view, right outside their window — "a virulent plague." The prophets and The Prophet neither equivocate nor vacillate on this matter: the vision without which the people will perish is not any vision that is the consequence of private revelation, but is rather the vision that results from finally seeing the "invisible" Christ in Lazarus the Least at the gate of society's dominant class with its dominating value system (Mt25: 31-46; Lk16: 19-31). ■



REV. EMMANUEL CHARLES McCARTHY, is a Melkite Catholic priest of the Eastern-rite who is presently the Acting Rector of St. Gregory the Theologian Melkite Seminary in Brookline, MA. He is the father of 13 children.