

The Spirit of Violence

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Summary: Recoils at the senseless murders of “bums” by four youths on August 16, 1954, in Brooklyn. Links this violence to the hate and fear of the McCarthy anti-communist hearings in Washington and the violence of weapons of mass destruction. Keywords: non-violence (DDLW #673).

“Native to nothingness.” That was a phrase Fr. Casey used at the retreat last month. I thought of it as I read the story of the horrible beatings and murders in Brooklyn, in the same Williamsburg section that Stanley Vishnewskey came from. There were gang wars then, fights between groups of boys. Lithuanian, Irish, Italian, and Jews—they all fought together and against each other. But there was some equality in the combat. This violence and murder reported in all the dailies, even in the New York Times, which does not usually feature such crime news, reeks of hell. It is native to nothingness, to the abyss, to the dark pit. There is an abandonment of all goodness, of all virtue, a direct embrace of evil for evil’s sake.

The Herald Tribune insists editorially that there must be some explanation. In an editorial entitled Horror in Brooklyn, the editor demands, “If anyone can suggest what led these teen-agers into their senseless killings it is something the whole city ought to know at once. And it would be interesting to hear if the causes can be pinned down to more specific grounds than the usual blaming of the home, the background, associates and what not. The catalog of crime is so peculiarly shocking that generalization will not do for an answer.”

Dr. Charles Malik, Greek Orthodox representative of Lebanon on the United Nations security council told a plenary session of the World Council of Churches today that at the present rate of spiritual impotence, it is only a matter of time before the whole of Asia and Africa and maybe even Europe will be engulfed by Communism.

Spiritual impotence and our militarized state may be the answer.

Joseph N. Welch, the Boston lawyer who represented the Army in the late Army-McCarthy hearings said that a cloud of hate and fear was hanging over Washington. “We seem to be measuring our reactions by emotion and not by logic and reason. The two simple emotions I observed at the Capital were fear and hate fanned to a white heat. It was frightening to me. Those who fan fear and hate to a white heat are doing this country a great disservice. A steady diet of this would destroy us.”

Bishop Sheil also attending the American Bar Associations’ National meeting said that “demagogues who preach rigid conformity and paralyzing fear as the only path to solidarity are false prophets who, in their attempt to preserve freedom, destroy it.”

Fear, hatred—these seem to be the frenzied emotions that lead to such violence which Brooklyn has recently witnessed. None of these young students, who were of middle class background suffered from material want. Frankly they killed for the thrill they said. Originally arrested for beating up a vagrant in full view of a police station, they confessed to other brutal attacks. One man they had beaten died, and another had been first tortured and beaten and then flung into the river to drown. Another man they beat, then attached gasoline-soaked rags to his legs and set fire to them. They whipped two young girls.

One of the four boys arrested was a musician, and played accompaniments to his father's violin. Another was a student of Mediaeval history. Another attended the synagogue regularly. All were neat, well-read, mannerly, according to the detectives investigating the case. The student of history gave as his explanation the fact that he "hated bums and vagrants" and felt they were of no use to society and better off dead. He had attended New York University and had hoped to teach. There is acrimony in the discussion among lawyers, social workers, judges, reporters and editors in this terrible case. The story of these youths, studious, homeloving, music lovers, regular clients at the public library, recalls the crime of Leopold and Loeb which shocked the world a generation ago. Since that crime of 1925 we have had wars and preparations for wars, and youth has become accustomed and trained in violence, in flushing out with flames and mopping up with mortars, in dropping napalm, flaming gasoline jelly, on the defenseless population in obliteration bombing and now finally the atomic weapons and nerve gas and even more deadly weapons of mass destruction.

There may have been satisfaction of a kind before in personal encounters, in the hand to hand fighting of one soldier against another. Denis de Rougement in his *Love in the Western World* had much to say on the sexual element in war. The Carmelite Review in France which is digging deep into the minds and hearts of men as is fitting for followers of St. John of the Cross, is responsible for the volume *Satan*, recently published by Sheed and Ward, and another volume entitled, we believe, *Love and Violence*. De Rougement's more recent book, *The Devil's Share*, might also throw some light on these problems.

The spirit of violence, of black hatred and fear, is certainly abroad today and must be dealt with.

If we, with deliberate intent, not from any softness or weakness, undertake the work of love and non-violence in all our thoughts, words and deeds, we will make a beginning of dealing with these problems. But we must remember, as Fr. Zossima said, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, that "love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."