NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Bring on the fifth graders

Joan Chittister | Jan. 31, 2008 From Where I Stand

Here's the problem with life: Some things count; some things don't. It's figuring out which is which that's difficult. Imagine, for instance, that you are teaching religion in the local parish school or church Sunday religious education program or neighborhood synagogue or mosque or temple. What answers about what is right and what is wrong would you have for the children these days?

Imagine that you're using one of those textbooks that start a chapter with little essays on truth and honesty and then follow them with a series of examples. You ask the children to tell you which of the following people, based on the essays they just read, are being most faithful to the law of God.

In the first example, the character stands up for human life and for civic honesty. He jeopardizes his own public reputation and position to call people's attention to the brutality and dishonesty around him. He puts himself at the mercy of the system, even at the expense of interrupting his own life to do it. No matter how many times they try to silence him he stands up again, like the child in the fairy tale who shouts about the nakedness of the king to an adult crowd that continues to go along with the king's game of personal splendor. "The emperor has no clothes," he shouts until the adults around him are forced to admit it.

In the second example, a very important public figure mocks the intelligence of the citizens who put him in office by giving them false information day after day. He distorts data in order to advance programs that will bring him great profit but will eventually destroy his part of the body politic if implemented. When confronted with his errors, he simply asserts them all the more. And the citizens, confused, bow to his authority and many of them die carrying out his plans as a result.

"Now, children," you say, "which of these figures is the honest one? Which of them should be punished and which of them should be rewarded?" A no-brainer, you'd think.

Fifth graders know the answer to this one. Maybe even second-graders who have been dodging parental controls long enough to know when they've done wrong and when they've done right in their personal little worlds know. But adults? Don't be so sure.

We're in the middle of those two examples right now in this country and adults seem to be having a very difficult time telling the difference between them or identifying the moral righteousness of either.

On the one hand, according to studies done by two nonprofit journalism organizations, (www.Publicintegrity.org [1]) President Bush and top administration officials issued more than 900 false statements on "at least 532 separate occasions" about the national security threat from Iraq in the two years following the 2001 terrorist attacks. More than 900. 532 times. No slips of the tongue these.

On the basis of that data, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians have been killed. So far almost 4,000 U.S. families have given spouses and children to the armed forces in Iraq, and they've gotten back folded U.S. flags not the breathing bodies of their loved ones.

No one in the government or the courts has said a single word about the egregiousness of a government that lies its way through term after term. No one with any power to do anything about it says that "the emperor has no clothes."

On the other hand, one Jesuit priest, has been arrested more than 75 times for daring to confront the government with its militarism, its violence, its dishonesty. He has gone to jail time and time again, trying to get justice for the poor who have died as a result of all those lies, or, at very least, to get our attention while he's doing it, to get the rest of us to say something about it, too.

But no. Just silence from the crowd.

Last week, he went back to court one more time. In September of 2006, John Dear and a group of other peace activists in New Mexico attempted to hand deliver a message to Senator Pete Domenici's office calling on the senator to denounce the war in Iraq.

Security guards refused to admit the group to the senator's third floor office on the grounds that the petition could have been delivered in the lobby of the federal building. Dear and his companions stayed in the elevator for four hours and were finally arrested.

In court on Jan. 24, Judge Don Svet, called John "a rogue priest" and a "coward," fined him $500 and sentenced him to six months of supervised probation in the state of New Mexico and 40 hours of community service. As if his whole life isn't a life of community service.

Dear, who received the harshest sentence of the group, says he has no plans to comply with any of the terms of the sentencing and is scheduled to give a retreat in Pennsylvania in February. "I expect I will eventually receive ? a warrant for my arrest," Dear says.

So, here's the problem: How is it that a president can lie at will and get re-elected and a priest can tell the truth and get arrested? And which one of them is really more moral, more honest, more religious?

Fr. John Dear, S.J., the priest, also writes a column for NCRcafe.org [2]. That's not why I'm writing this column. I'm writing this column because I'm part of the crowd and I'm not saying enough.

But from where I stand, one thing is clear: It may be time to turn the country over to the fifth graders. Either that or get someone else to teach religion.

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[1] http://www.Publicintegrity.org
[2] http://ncrcafe.org/blog/1122