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

Whatever happened to the middle?

Joan Chittister | May. 26, 2010 From Where I Stand

It hasn?t been easy to write a column these last two weeks. Or, perhaps, more correctly, it is getting far too easy to write a column these days. Every time we turn around there is something else to write about that would, at one time, have seemed impossible.

The furor over the health care bill, for instance, opened up a fissure that exposed multiple forms of good faith for all to see. Everybody wanted to do good; everybody wanted to do it differently. Why did we call some of them faithful and some of them faithless?

The Tea Party movement and its endless protests against anyone and everyone they accuse of catapulting the country into socialism, ranted in the streets rather than talk in conference halls. Why is there no governmentally conducted conversation about the implications of the legislation that arouses their concerns?

In another part of our small world, people demonstrated for the acceptance of guns on university campuses that confess they have a greater student drinking problem than at any other period in their history. When will we discuss the difference between ?the right to bear arms? and ?the right to own arms,? the right to have guns as opposed to the right to walk the streets with them.

In Arizona, the ?outlaw hunters? are roaming the state again, looking for undocumented aliens to deport. And, as a result, in California, they are planning a boycott of Arizona for doing it. So, back in Arizona, they are threatening to turn off the electricity that serves California. When are we going to consider together the national effects and implications of this kind of state-driven tit for tat that verges far too closely on interstate warfare.

The point is clear: We have, in fact, become a society of opposites.

Instead of being grateful for the fact that two voices are being raised for the sake of universal health care and in defense of life -- some seem to think that the holiest, the only moral posture if you?re really pro-life, is to pit the unborn against the born.

Rather than holding public meetings or signing petitions to ask officials to rethink one position over another, we take to our bunkers and count everyone who is not with us as against us, despite the fact that we may all be on the same side but seeing a thing from a different perspective. If we don?t all like ?A? and we don?t all like ?B,? when can we all start talking about creating ?C??

Rather than strengthen laws to reduce violence in the society, we are forming private militias and arming students to defend themselves violently and so release even more violence into this already violent society.

In every one of these issues, there is a common concern. In each situation, there is the glow of truth. And, instead of discussion, in all of these cases, there are strong and unrelenting answers in profusion.

But in a society facing global change in every arena -- science, economics, governance, education, ethics, sex

roles and medicine -- it is lack for respect of questions, not the presence of answers, that is really the problem.

The questions are serious but, in the face of intimidation or the presence of unnecessary vitriol, they are either being unasked or unheard. And so, as a result, most of the answers are inadequate to the other half of the population:

What to do about undocumented aliens in a country built on the blood of immigrants, for instance? What to do to assure the security of the citizenry rather than arm them all against one another? What to do about a government that spends more than it makes because its financial sector has already gambled more in bad mortgages than should ever have been given?

And even where the church is concerned, the ?answers? leave too much to desire to be simply asserted if what we want is conversion rather than compliance. The answers too often fail to persuade.

The children of gay parents, we?re told, can?t be accepted in a Catholic school because ?they?ll be confused? by the tension between official Catholic teaching and their family situation. But how is having a lesbian parent more confusing to a child in a Catholic school than it was to have a Protestant parent who, we learned, couldn?t go to heaven? After all, I was one of the children who went to a Catholic school with the ghost of a Protestant father on my back and a mother who had also ?lived in sin,? they told me, until the marriage got ?fixed? in a dark sacristy one Saturday afternoon years later? I managed, it seems, to tell the difference between the ideal and the real, to love the faith and negotiate the ?confusion,? to commit myself to a religious life in the church, regardless. Life was no more ideal then than it is now, no more complex now than it was then. And we all survived the struggle it took to move from certainty to uncertainty to synthesis.

Surely with that kind of experience we can muster up the faith to state the ideals and go on discussing the questions before we pronounce on them with hobnail boots. After all, we even took Protestant children themselves in our schools years later and we were all the better for it. Why should we be refusing the children of gay and lesbian parents now?

Or, consider the question of the nun ethicist in a Catholic hospital who read the law in favor of an early abortion for a dying mother of four other children in order to save one life instead of losing both. We?re told that for that act of ethical judgment the nun is excommunicated and may be forced to leave her order. Why? After all, bishops who protected pedophile priests are still in their chanceries, despite the harm those decisions made to thousands of other children?

How is it that the eternal principle that ?we may never do evil to achieve good? works for sick and pregnant women but not for predator drones or the nuclear bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that destroyed entire populations?

Instead, as a Christian society we kill for national political reasons, we kill in self-defense, we kill to punish criminals, we kill under stress and for reasons of emotion. And one at a time, we judge the seriousness, the morality, of every one of those actions -- separately -- in the light of the situation and circumstances. How is it, then, that every other life issue admits of degrees of guilt but not this one?

Most of all, how is it that anyone who asks any of these questions, who seeks sincere understanding are labeled pro-abortion, anti-American, jingoistic, socialist, racist, immoral -- whatever.

From where I stand, it seems to me that a society without a middle -- or worse, a society where the middle is suppressed, where the questions are rejected, labeled and condemned, where thinkers are intimidated, drummed out of the corps, derided and suppressed by those whose pronouncements do not admit of questions -- is a society at war with itself.

What is important is striving to ask the right questions and to listen to the questions rather than insisting that there is always only one sufficient answer.

To that problem, we know the answer for sure: ?A house divided against itself,? the scripture warns, ?cannot stand.?

Source URL (retrieved on *04/27/2015 - 17:03*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/whatever-happened-middle