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Church leaders, remember: Violent words make violent acts

Nicole Sotelo | Feb. 4, 2011

Violent political rhetoric did not gun down Representative Gabrielle Giffords and 18 of her constituents. Words do not wield guns and ideas are incapable of killing.

But if a human is responsible for pulling the trigger, what is it that triggers someone to kill? What effect do words have?

A CNN poll last month [1] revealed that the U.S. public believes a number of factors contributed to the Tucson shooting. 70 percent of those surveyed blamed the lack of ?resources to deal with people who may be mentally ill? and 48 percent felt that the ?use of harsh rhetoric and violent metaphors by politicians and commentators? was a contributing factor.

Others blamed gun laws and still others Sarah Palin?s target chart.

Ultimately, it is a mystery what motivated Jared Lee Loughner to pull the trigger, but we know that something spurred him to murder a congressperson and her constituents rather than the multiple people he encountered in the hours before the murder. Maybe it was Loughner?s own mental illness, but maybe the madness within our political rhetoric made the target more clear for someone whose thinking was already clouded.

It is not rhetoric itself, but rhetoric?s power that should give us pause. Rhetoric cannot force someone to respond. Nonetheless, persuasive words have the power to inspire someone into action. Words become enfleshed; people can take an idea and embody it. Think Martin Luther King, Jr?s. speeches and bus boycotts.

Unfortunately, rhetoric may also be used for ill, particularly when it is used to label specific groups of people as foreign or dangerous. Think Adolf Hitler rallies and concentration camps. Think Charles Coughlin radio addresses and anti-Semitism marches.

There has been much talk in the past few weeks regarding violent *political rhetoric and its influence on people, but I find myself equally concerned about harmfulecclesial rhetoric and its influence in the church today. Does ecclesial rhetoric have the potential to fuel harm?*

Just last week, news reports from Uganda announced that David Kato, the courageous LGBT rights campaigner, was beaten to death. His murder came just a few months after his photo, along with others, was published in a newspaper under the words ?Hang them.?

This tragedy follows a year of anti-LGBT fervor, much of which was attributed to conservative religious leaders from the United States who had traveled to Uganda in late 2009, bringing their harmful anti-gay rhetoric with them.

While the Vatican doesn?t advocate violence against people who identify as LGBT, it nonetheless raises the specter of violence as a warning should governments pass civil equality for the LGBT community. From the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*

:

> [W]hen homosexual activity is consequently condoned, or when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior?neither the Church nor society as large should be surprised when other distorted notions and practices gain ground, and irrational and violent reactions increase.

In fact, the Vatican gave up its opportunity to help reduce the violence against LGBT people in 2008 when the United Nations considered a resolution that would have spared LGBT people worldwide from the death penalty and criminalization.

The Vatican?s representative to the United Nations declared his opposition to the resolution, worrying it would ?add new categories of those protected from discrimination.?

I suppose the Vatican?s stance is no surprise, this coming from a religious leadership that uses the words [2] ?intrinsically disordered? and ?intrinsic moral evil? when discussing the lives of those who are not heterosexual. In the end, while violent rhetoric may not be directly responsible for murder, such rhetoric may contribute to an environment where a distressed or disturbed soul may feel compelled to beat an innocent man or, in the case of the Tucson shootings, pull a trigger.

Words do have the potential to become flesh. This is a belief essential to Christians. Recall the mystery of the incarnation. God?s word became human and walked among us.

How different the appearance between the rhetoric of harm employed by our political and ecclesial leaders, and the rhetoric of love embodied in Jesus.

In the weeks since the Tucson tragedy, there have been calls for increased civility in political discourse.

I can only pray our ecclesial discourse would move in the same direction. Rhetoric has consequences realized in the flesh.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **www.WomenHealing.com** [3]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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