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"Stand Your Ground" & the Culture of Death

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 20, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

I have held off writing about last weekend?s verdict in the trial of Michael Dunn, the man who killed a black teenager, Jordan Davis, during a shouting match over the loud music that Davis and his friends were playing. Dunn was convicted on three counts of attempted murder, but the jury could not reach a verdict on the lead charge of first degree murder in the shooting of Davis.

The reason I held off was a simple one: Every time I thought of this case, I got angry, and anger is not a good place from which to write. Feisty? Yes. Churlish? Sometimes. Anger. No. E.J. Dionne helped break the ice for me with his fine commentary on ?stand your ground laws? in this morning?s Washington Post [1]. His dispassionate examination of the facts of the case, and the terrible consequences of these laws, is well worth a read.

Still, I find myself seething that Mr. Dunn was not convicted of the murder of Davis. I would want to ask the jurors who voted not to convict how they think Mr. Davis died? Natural causes? Is no one to blame? Is Davis himself to blame? Does the playing of loud music provide justification for someone who doesn?t like it to pull out a gun and start shooting? This is madness.

The madness did not drop from the sky. It is the result of a culture of death meeting an industry of violence. We have all become affected by what Pope Francis called the ?globalization of indifference.? That is the starting point for the culture of death: When we are indifferent to the life and dignity of another human being, the door is open for violence to occur without a second thought. I did not watch the trial closely, but it was impossible to miss Dunn?s testimony. He seemed utterly indifferent to the harm he had caused. He seemed to think he was justified in responding to loud music with a firearm.

In Florida, this indifference collided with an industry of violence, specifically the National Rifle Association which has sought to enact these ?stand your ground? laws. Why not? As E.J. points out, in a ?stand your ground? legal culture, the man with the gun has the clear advantage, both at the moment and at the trial, so the obvious thing to do in Florida these days is to get yourself a firearm. And, at trial, Mr. Davis was not present to give his account of what happened that night, just as Trayvon Martin was not able to attend the trial of the man who killed him. In both cases, the defendant could claim he felt threatened, and that was enough to muddy the waters.

I do not know how those jurors looked at Davis?s family. Indeed, throughout the past few days, as I thought about this trial, the thing that kept coming back to me mind was this: What must it be like to be a mother of a black teenage boy these days? How does one explain that, time and again, the murder of a black teenage boy cannot find any justice? Davis was armed with loud music. Martin had been armed with Skittles. Are the streets of Florida safe for black teenagers when Skittles are sufficient provocation for pulling out a gun and firing?

I listened on the radio to a discussion of these ?stand your ground? laws and heard an advocate for them make one contrived claim after another. He was skillful, even artful in his way. But, again, what to say to the mothers? On behalf of some abstract theory about the need to protect gun owners? rights to use their weapons, kids are

being killed without cause, and the criminal justice system cannot even prosecute the murderers. The way to confront the culture of death is to find ways for people to focus not on the theory but on reality. This applies to ?stand your ground? as it applies to abortion. Davis is dead. A seventeen year old who was apparently a good kid is in the ground. The NRA and its apologists can take their arguments and put them?.someplace unpleasant. They must be made to face the reality of what they have wrought. Similarly, in the case of abortion, think of the countless euphemisms that are invoked to keep our attention away from the violence of the act. Euphemisms, abstract NRA-generated theories, and, to use a different example, tales of the elderly suffering as a means of justifying euthanasia, all start with indifference and create an architecture, a culture of death.

The culture of death is a horrible thing but we Catholics cannot make the same mistake, allowing the phrase to become an abstraction, or a bumper sticker, or a slogan. The culture of death is real. There is a real abortion clinic up the street. There is a grave marking the resting place of Jordan Davis and Trayvon Martin. Confronting this evil in our midst is not easy, and both political parties are selectively naïve or indifferent when it comes to human dignity. There will always be hateful bigots like Michael Dunn and trigger happy vigilantes like George Zimmerman. While I would love nothing better than to see the 2nd Amendment understood on strict, originalist grounds as the right o bear a musket, that is not about to happen anytime soon. But, getting these ?stand your ground? laws off the books is a possibility. And, the Church that champions the culture of life should be leading the way. (Bringing back the consistent ethic of life, the "seamless garment," is a good place to start.) Enough death. Enough injustice. Enough indifference. Enough dead black teenagers.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ej-dionne-repeal-stand-your-ground-laws/2014/02/19/38fd3d64-999f-11e3-80ac-63a8ba7f7942_story.html