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How much is one life worth?

Phyllis Zagano | Oct. 26, 2011 Just Catholic

I know you know about Moammar Gadhafi's death. Who could miss the news? The major players rushed to the world stage with their opinions. The Vatican issued a statement.

Wang Yue died around the same time as Gadhafi. What have world leaders and the Vatican said about Wang Yue?

Who?

Wang Yue. She was a 2-year-old girl run over by a van in Foshan in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. The driver seemed to notice what he did, backed up, went over her again, then drove off, leaving her bleeding in the street. Incredibly, after 18 people walked by with barely a glance, another van ran over her.

Finally a woman -- described as a rag picker -- dragged the little girl to the side of the road. Wang Yue's mother rushed to cradle her child, who died eight days later in a hospital intensive care unit.

You can probably still find the YouTube video of the event. Almost 750,000 people have watched it.

I saw it once. You don't need to.

You don't need to see it any more than you need to see video of a bloodied Gadhafi being dragged out of a drainage pipe, or lying dead in a meat locker, or any of the other gory presentations that masquerade as news.

Bloodcurdling photos and video gone viral on the Internet present a new pornography. There are several points in this Technicolor sensationalism that world leaders or, I daresay, the Vatican, might comment on.

First, there is a question of common decency. We've seen these images in the news before: the grainy cellphone video of Sadaam Hussein being hanged, the photos of a dead Osama bin Laden. What are we looking at and why are we so transfixed?

Next, there is the question of retribution against enemies. That's it, the world muses. They're done, we got them, hooray for us! What are we feeling?

And then there is the question of the value of human life. These are real events with real people. Are we so inured to horror movies that we make no distinction between the fictional and the real? Do blood and guts upon the pavement no longer invoke any recoil or remorse?

We know Gadhafi and the other two dead leaders ruled in horrible regimes, and their deaths can be attributed to the horrors of war. Such does not make staring at their corpses any saner, but it might help explain it.

But what about the little girl? This was a tiny injured human being, ignored by real people. What replaced humanity in the 20 passersby in the surveillance video of this incident? They walk, they saunter, they ride their bikes and merely look askance at the bleeding and no doubt wailing little girl. How could they not help this child?

Yes, China -- or at least the province where the tragedy played out -- does not seem to have Good Samaritan laws. Not that long ago, a young driver stopped to help an old lady who had fallen. The old lady later sued -- and won -- charging that the man who said he stopped to help had really hit her with his car.

But a little girl? A little girl left like a bundle of bleeding rags on a market street until a simple woman pulls her to the curb?

Of course there is somewhat of a national, even international, firestorm. At least two Chinese citizens interviewed by the BBC gave the answer to what replaced humanity in the players in this tale. They said China's religion and morality has fallen in the face of economic growth. They were quite clear and succinct in their diagnosis of the illness: Money replaced morality.

So, will the Chinese national outrage remain, or will the firestorm die down? Reportedly, the first van driver said he ran over Wang Yue a second time because it was cheaper to pay for an accidental death than for hospitalization. From what I recall of the video, it does not appear the second driver knew he did anything at all. They are both under arrest.

To what end? Each man can claim an accident. Each can claim he did no wrong. Each will be tried and fined.

Which brings us to the moral of the story. In this world these days there is a price that can be put upon a human life. There was a hefty price put on Sadaam's head, just as on bin Laden's, and probably (though secretly) on Gadhafi's as well. To the victor went -- or will go -- the spoils.

So with Wang Yue. Someone will assess the "damages" and her family will be reimbursed. But we will learn Wang Yue was not "worth" as much as any of those other three, her "value" was much lower.

How much? How much, exactly, is one human life worth?

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