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

Just Catholic

Phyllis Zagano | Oct. 6, 2010 Just Catholic

It?s not too much to say when *NCR* asked me to write in its pages I nearly hurt myself jumping at the chance. I grew up with *NCR*?s light shining on the issues -- especially the Catholic issues -- of the day. Now I am in the august company of writers I?ve read for ages -- Eugene Kennedy, Joan Chittister, Richard McBrien -- along with newer, younger voices in Catholic commentary.

I?ve written and spoken about Catholic issues for a long time -- mostly in secular settings. What?s new -- for me at least -- is now I?m writing in Catholic media for educated Catholics. My column is called ?Just Catholic.? That?s all. That?s it. Just Catholic.

Of course I have an ax to grind. Several, in fact. Lots of issues attract my eye -- life issues, women?s issues, internal church issues. I think I give a particularly Catholic perspective on the news, especially when the church itself becomes the news.

It?s no secret secular media are playing ?get the church.? Too many ignorant writers find Catholicism a target large enough to hit. Bad information swims around newsrooms, escaping on every news cycle tide. Editors publish poorly researched stories and downright anti-Catholic remarks every day.

It doesn?t take a dose of paranoia to know there?s tons of money being made like that. We?ll have the chance to talk about that, too.

But, for today, let me give you an idea of how I see the world at large.

I?ve had a news clip floating around my desk since early June. I simply cannot throw it away. *The New York Times* quoted a U.N. report on U.S. use of remote-controlled drones in places like Yemen and Pakistan. One sentence in the 29-page report stayed with me all these months: ?Because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audio-feed, there is a risk of developing a ?Playstation? mentality to killing.?

Get the picture? I?m surely not the first in line at anti-war rallies, but this concept, this recognition of what we?ve come to, runs right through me.

Playstation war. It?s clean, it?s antiseptic. Not much different from the thousands of video games now well advanced from Pac-Man, all with the same basic theme. Get the other guy. Smash him. Maim him. Kill him. Obliterate him.

The video games are self-driven cartoons, but not like the ones you may remember. When Felix got flattened, he popped right up again. Not here.

Only in nursery rhymes did we get a hint of reality. Humpty-Dumpty?s been falling off that wall for 200 years, and every child knows he can?t be reconstructed.

The subtle transition from nursery rhyme to cartoon to video game to remote control of a live drone omits one crucial point about the drones: There are real people down there in Yemen and Pakistan. There are real people with histories and families, with hopes and dreams. Are they the enemy? Maybe. Maybe not.

They say that when you kill someone you never quite recover. That principle comes from live combat -- hand to hand -- or at least close range. As technology removes the warrior from the war, and killing becomes a clean blood sport, we?ve done something to ourselves that cannot be repaired.

Playstation war distances us -- all of us -- from reality, because every one of us allows it (and pays for it in one way or another). Playstation war distances us from the very essence of our beings, from the spark of life within us that connects with every other person and with God.

Which is the bottom line. If we talk about religion, we must talk about the way we live it. It?s not only relationship with God, it?s relationship with ourselves and with each other.

If we distance ourselves -- even remotely -- from what the Velveteen Rabbit called the ?really real? we might just as well pack it in and quit the game, because we?ve lost already.

We?re certainly not winning. A ?Playstation? mentality is creeping into all our relationships, not just the conduct of war. We?re separated, not connected, by e-mail and social media. We?re separated from each other by each other, and the cacophony closes out our own thoughts and even prayers.

None of it: the nastiness in secular media, the e-mail separation, or for sure the remote drones in war, does us justice as Christians, as Catholics, as human beings.

I don?t know where it?s going, but I am grateful for the opportunity to think about these things with you.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic Studies. Her book *Women & Catholicism* will be published by Palgrave-Macmillan in 2011.]

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