

## BEWARE OF TEACHING CHILDREN TO HATE!



How do you explain war to children? In the last decades, scientific and non-fiction literature have tried to respond to this profound question by endowing it with a new perspective, that is, by recounting how it is spoken about by children who have experienced war or who have seen it on television and by means of the new technologies. The children's most frequent responses to war are to reject it, to "banish" it by blocking it out, or else to remember it by means of a flower, a candle and/or a prayer.

Today we are living a "fragmented" war on the global level—a war in which the line between fiction and reality has become blurred. In fact, many people do not have even a minimal perception of its true nature and violence. Several studies reveal a dramatic picture: children today spend from 4-5 hours a day before the TV or navigating the Internet. For most of that time they are alone, without the educational "filter" of adults. Front-line news coverage about war and stories that involve violence have become routine, prompting speculation that they might increase tendencies toward violence in their viewers and readers, especially minors. It is clear and empirically verifiable that after having viewed or listened to news about war or witnessed it transformed into a huge motion-picture display, minors tend to adopt militaristic behavior, asking for toys that can help them "play" at being soldiers. This type of reaction and behavior tends to justify aggression and "just wars." But is war always just? We have only to think of the deluge of bombs released over cities, each warhead emblazoned with the message: "Sent to you with love!" But does love include death and destruction? Didn't Jesus Christ tell us to love and forgive our enemies? Didn't he tell us not to harm those who injure us?

Any discussion about war should take as its starting point forgiveness and dialogue—two attitudes that Pope Francis insists are "not negotiable" (Florence Conference, 10.11.15). Of course it is hard to dialogue and forgive, but it is the only way to "wash away" blood—even though it might be scarlet—and return things to a pristine state. It is possible to achieve this through various modes of communication if the media (including the Catholic media) would refuse to be influenced by their audiences and would not dramatize evil, presenting it as something

good. In this regard, let us take a look at all the deaths the "war" of immigration has produced, including the heart-wrenching pictures of a drowned toddler washed ashore—pictures that were then plastered all over our Catholic magazines. The display of what evil does should be manifested in all cases, not just selectively-chosen ones. Pictures and videos are powerful but words make an even greater impact: "They are extremely effective when they spring from the heart and inspire people to action. But when we are empty inside and our words are centered on ourselves, then what we say is lifeless and irritating" (Francesco De Santis). I would add that words can also be violent and devastating when they give rise to war upon war, hate upon hate, always greater distances and always higher walls. We can only imagine the consequences when our words recount facts that are already tragic in themselves.

After the terror attacks in Paris (and these were not a "first" given that Our Lady of Mt. Carmel parish, where I am the pastor, sorrowfully lost Brigadier Giuseppe Coletta in an act of terrorism that took place in Nassyria in 2003), the subsequent catechism classes and Eucharistic Celebrations allowed children and teens to express their grief and fears. The response of the children was very clear and dramatic: "We aren't afraid of war," they said. "We're afraid of people."

The massive flood of communications at all hours of the day—during which television programming often does not respect the "protective hours" in which youthful viewers predominate—seems to cause individuals to detach themselves emotionally from tragic events and to generate a fear of other people, both near and far. War stories are more "telegenic" than stories about peace and they often feature martyred bodies, put on display without mercy.

The Catholic media have a great responsibility to tell children that their hands should hold pencils, crayons, notebooks and books; that they should be attending school and visiting museums. They must tell children that we are created in the image and likeness of God, who is love. We need to teach our children about love, not about war and conflict, even though these are at times inevitable. Terror generates paralysis, and pictures and stories about war that do not point out paths of hope give rise to static and numbing images of hate.

So what can we do? Show our children images of war or else hide those images from them? Instead, let us ask ourselves how we can explain those images without instrumentalizing them and transforming them into a "business" revolving around emotions.

*Fr. Fortunato Di Noto*

Founder and President of *Meter onlus*