

**VIOLENCE IN OUR COMMUNITIES**  
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**Introduction**

When I said I would try to write this section of CMSM's manual on violence, I assumed I'd be discussing issues of conflict and their resolution in our religious communities. But before I began to write, a pamphlet crossed my desk entitled "Violence in Our Communities: The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide."<sup>i</sup> This made me aware, not only of how our notion of "community" can be quite myopic (in this case, identified with our local houses); it also helped me realize that our myopia often mirrors our society's violence. When this happens our mirroring the violence around us in our communities themselves can keep us from modeling an alternative.

This realization presents another anomaly facing me as I write this section insofar as I am a Capuchin Franciscan. I am part of an international community with conflicts in our houses of various forms. Just this year we learned of one of our communities in Italy wherein the police had to come because one of the brothers had threatened to kill another. So much for "Lord, make us instruments of your peace!"

In the following paragraphs I will offer some ideas related to violence in our communities and ways of moving them to non-violence and peace. We are well-aware of what violence is in the "World." However, since our role as religious men is to "read the signs of the times" in light of the "Word," I'd like to turn to the scriptures for help in understanding the nature of violence among us. I suggest that we find some direction in two scriptural sources: the Letter of James and the Gospel according to Matthew.

**The Letter of James**

Probably the classic New Testament text on understanding the nature of violence in a community comes from the Letter of James: Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and you do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures (4:1-3).

James' notion of the source of violence among us leads us to address the violence within us. What he calls our "cravings," our "wants," and our "coveting," can be viewed from the perspective of disordered desire. While desire ultimately reflects our inner orientation to God which human substitutes cannot satisfy, it also has a shadow side. We find this uncovered in Rene Girard's notion of mimetic desire. When this happens, we don't just desire to have what another has; we try to become who the other one is.

The main instrument to insure the continuation of our market economy is advertising. However advertising's main purpose is to stimulate and massage desire in order to sustain our market-based culture. But this capitalization on desire has reordered its positive role in a way that has extracted a high cost. According

to Gil Bailie, it "has completely drowned out the words of caution with which our tradition has spoken of desire and warned of its alienating, morally debilitating, and socially ravaging potential."<sup>ii</sup> It will not be surprising, therefore, that Girard's notion of mimetic desire is one whose significance and larger implications may take time for us to appreciate.

In the section "Coming to Terms with Violence," I outlined Rene Girard's theory of mimetic desire that leads to what James calls the willingness to kill. It may be good to recall those points for our elaboration here. The essence of Girard's theory revolves around mimetic desire. This kind of desire entails the "influence" of one on another in relationships wherein the "ability to influence" represents power used positively or negatively. Violence represents the abuse of power or a negative force or "influence." Struggling because of competing influences, the mimetic form of desire is not just the desire to have what someone possesses, but to be the one we desire (ie, to have the kind of influence the other seems to possess). This creates enough forms of jealousy among us that we need a common scapegoat to keep us from conflict that will lead to further violence.

But, we might ask, in our religious communities, who is the scapegoat? I would suggest that this sacred role traditionally has been enacted by the superior. However, with the breakdown of obedience among us, the once-sacred power of the superior no longer has the ability to do the greater violence (ie, control) to keep our violence in check. The sacrificial system our notion of obedience inculcated among us no longer has "force" over us. In the words of Girard: "Desire is what happens to human relationships when there is no longer any resolution through the victim, and consequently no form of polarization that is genuinely unanimous and can trigger such a resolution."<sup>iii</sup> Therefore, we need a new approach to address the violence that still remains among us by our disordered desires.

As I consider how conflicts arise in a community, I find their source in disordered desires of one kind or another. These get expressed in unarticulated expectations or unrealized assumptions. The dynamic can be charted as follows:

CONFLICT = UNREALIZED EXPECTATIONS = UNAGREED UPON ASSUMPTIONS

Since most of us have never been trained in ordered ways of conflict resolution, we resort to dealing with our conflicts in less-than-healthy ways. Often, in order to maintain some kind of community order (if lieu of peace), we will revert to older forms of "obedience" which rely on the force of a "superior" to keep the potential for more violence in check. However, in a milieu in which the superior's "real" authority has been diminished, we will find ourselves without sustained resolution of our tensions. We thus need to look to another source to provide the kind of obedience whose authority provides a more creative way to address the violence in and among us. This leads me to Matthew's Gospel.

### **Conflicts and Their Resolution in the Jesus Gospel of Matthew**

Today's scripture scholars are well-aware that the gospels were written, in part, to address concrete issues of violence or conflict in the local house churches and among them. My research

into Matthew's gospel shows this definitely to be the case. Yet my research is not original. As early as 1970 the Jesuit, William Thompson, published his findings into conflict in the Matthean Community under the title: Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community.<sup>iv</sup>

If we look deeply into the fourth discourse of Matthew (17:24-18:35)<sup>v</sup> we find the basic structure of a traditional "household code" (haustafel) that usually has been identified with the haustafeln of Paul (Col. 3:18-4:6; 1 Tim. 2:1-8; Tit. 2:1-10; see Eph. 5:21-6:9) and 1 Peter 2:18-3:7. Hauptafeln had two main elements. The first discusses forms of submission to civic and household authority (ie, "wives, be submissive to your husbands); the second addresses relationships among the household members to each other and, often, the art of money-making.

Matthew 17:24-18:35 seems to follow this twofold structure. After discussing the paying of the temple tax to the civil authority (17:24-27), Matthew then addresses the sources of violence in the community (18:1-9). Then he offers a code for the creation of peace therein (18:10-34). He concludes with a pericope that stresses the need for mutual forgiveness (18:21-35).

### **1. Examining the Two Main Sources of Conflict**

Before a community can achieve peace, it must root out its sources of violence. In Matthew's unique approach, the sources of conflict in a community are twofold: power plays (18:1-5) and dynamics which create "stumbling blocks" (18:6-9).

Power plays (Mt. 18:1-5) don't only deal with "who is the greatest," but whose influence or whose ideas are better than others. At this points the issue of mimetic desire discussed above comes into play. When community members are classified by who is greater and who is lesser, competing interests arise in a way that increases the violence. The invitation of Jesus to renounce such is the first step in non-violence. This represents the emptying attitude that makes us children fit for God's reign.

Next Matthew discusses conflict in his house churches in a way that has application to us as well. He defines what needs to be "cut out" (18:6-9). While Matthew offered two forces needing excision if scandal (division) occurred -- your foot or your eye, I would apply this notion in an extended sense. Today, I also find two things that need to be "cut out" if we are to have communities free of violence: a) the attitudes that lead to wars and conflicts among us in our houses as well as b) the obstacles we put in the path of conflict resolution itself.

a) Elsewhere I have discussed at length the attitudes that find us going to war (in varying degrees of intensity) in our communities.<sup>vi</sup> However, it seems clear that we never have actual conflicts of a sustained nature without the prior development of basic attitudes which justify why we can be at war with one another. When this happens the attitudes/ideologies of both sides constellate around various ways of thinking about the other: the "diabolical" enemy-image, the virile self-image, the moral self-image, selective inattention, lack of empathy, and an overall irrational interpretation of what has or is happening.<sup>vii</sup> Unless these attitudes are "cut out," the possibility of tensions

escalating into greater conflicts and even to possible wars will be very real.

b) The second thing that needs to be "cut out" is a stance which refuses to be open to concrete ways of conflict resolution. However, since the first step in conflict resolution is that at least one of the conflicted parties must want it and the other(s) must be willing to go along with the process, we return again to the notion of desire. To desire an end to the conflict is the first step in the process of its resolution.

Building on this desire to "cut out" what leads to conflict among the members of a community, I have found other steps necessary to make in the process of conflict resolution: active listening, understanding that engenders a new kind of respect, acceptance of the other (if not of what has been done), and an admission of one's own part in the dynamics that created the conflict.

When we use contemporary forms to address those conditions that lead to conflict among us in our households, we can be ready to move to Matthew's "recipe for peace" which fleshes out the rest of his chapter (18:10-35).

## **2. Making Peace within Our Communities**

\_\_\_\_\_ In the section above which discussed James' idea that all conflicts arise from competing influences or mimetic desire, I showed how conflict flows from unrealized expectations. These, in turn, arise from unagreed-upon assumptions. Both the unrealized expectations and unagreed-upon assumptions represent normal desires that are unmet. Since the left side of the chart above (ie, conflict) represents the violence consequent to these unmet desires, we must look to the right side of the chart to find a solution which will offer another way of relating that will keep conflict in our relationships at a minimum.

If the root of violence/conflict rests in "unagreed-upon assumptions," I have concluded that we need to develop some basic agreements, groundrules, or peace "covenants" if we are not to result in or regress into destructive patterns of violence. I find two basic ingredients for such a peace "agreement" in Matthew's next pericopes: the need for affirming the worth of each member of the community (18:10-14) and finding ways (built on the affirmation) for community correction, challenge, and/or confrontation (18:15-20). To sustain peace in a community, all the members should make a mutual agreement to find ways of affirming each other and being affirmed by each other as well as to challenge one another and to be open to challenges from the rest of the members.

A basic problem facing us men is that we do not take time to affirm one another. Too often we take each other for granted. As a result, many of us turn to our work, to our peers, or to those among whom we minister to find our support. The community becomes merely the place from which we go and return. When this happens our relational support will be sought from without. Consequently as individuals we stray from identifying with the community. When enough of us do this, the bonds of community further erode. Thus Matthew's Jesus urged his house churches to be watchful for any who stray and to develop ways of seeking the lost sheep: "It is

not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost" (Mt. 18:14).

After we have created sustained styles of affirmation, we can use this affirmation as the legitimation for challenging or confronting those dynamics in (an)other(s) which conflict with our desires. Matthew outlines three steps in the process of community correction (18:15-18): one-on-one dialogue, the word of "two others," or the church (house meeting/superior). However, this means the steps to challenge (building on the affirmation) do not start with the house meeting or superior; they start with adults trying to talk it out, one-on-one.

The consequence of abiding in this peace-covenant or "making the groundrule" (as a community in which I lived called it), is the potential for powerful prayer in common: "Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:19-20).<sup>viii</sup> "The Fifth Plenary Council of the Order: Our Prophetic Presence in the World," *The Path of Renewal of the Capuchin Friars Minor* (North American Capuchin Conference, 1995), 119.

Finally, Matthew offers one specific attitude and practice that must undergird all authentic approaches to non-violence (besides renunciation ["emptying"] and resistance ["engagement"]). We find this upon Peter's query of Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Mt. 18:21-22). Concluding chapter 18, Matthew has Jesus tell the story of the unjust debtor who has his debt forgiven only to refuse to extend the same forgiveness to another (18:23-34).

Forgiveness represents the heart of non-violent community living. It not only frees the one who is injured; it frees the one who inflicts the injury. Without forgiveness there can be no reconciled community, no non-violent community of love. This is why Jesus' final words in Matthew 18 offer a perennial challenge to each of us: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Mt. 18:35).

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<sup>i</sup> The Topsfield Foundation, Violence in Our Communities: The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide (Pomfret, CT: Study Circles Resource Center, 1994).

<sup>ii</sup> Gil Bailie, Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads (New York: Crossroads, 1995), 51.

<sup>iii</sup> Rene Girard, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1987), 288.

<sup>iv</sup> William Thompson, Matthew's Advice to a Divided Community

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(Rome: Biblical Institute, 1970).

<sup>v</sup> The application of the haustafeln to the Fourth Discourse of Matthew was developed by me in my doctoral dissertation which was published independently as House of Disciples: Church, Economics, and Justice in Matthew (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), passim.

<sup>vi</sup> Michael H. Crosby, O.F.M.Cap., Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First World Christians (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993 [1981]), 182-198.

<sup>vii</sup> I got these ideas from Ralph K. White's insights into the attitudes that led to and sustained warring sides in the First, Second, Korean, and Vietnamese Wars. Nobody Wanted War: Misperception in Vietnam and Other Wars (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1970).

<sup>viii</sup> In describing how communities might overcome alienating individualism, a Plenary Council of my own Capuchin Order suggesting a kind of "Matthean Peace Plan" such as has been described herein:

In order that we may be able to overcome division, alienation and individualism in our fraternities in an evangelical manner, we suggest the adoption of the method proposed by Matthew's Gospel for his Church when it faced similar alienating situations (Mt. 18:1-2). Specifically this implies:

- a. That we try to overcome existing divisions (Mt. 18:1-9);
- b. That we affirm each other in mutual esteem on the basis of each person's worth (Mt. 18:10-24);
- c. That we practice fraternal correction aimed at conversion (Mt. 18:15-18);
- d. That, having been bonded in solidarity fostered by affirmation and correction, we will be more united and our prayer will be more efficacious (Mt. 18:19-20).