

COLUMNISTS

Today's Christians need to do more

The last few weeks have been among the most horrible in recent memory in terms of national and international news. Our country is involved in a horrific war (as all wars are) in Kosovo, and our own schoolchildren have shot and bombed a school in Colorado, at the cost of many innocent lives and a loss of confidence for all of us.

Ironically, we watch these national and world events from the social perspective of the most "successful" society in the history of the world. We are unopposed now by any "global" enemy force, perhaps for the first time in history. As a nation, we enjoy unparalleled prosperity. Our personal opportunities for a fruitful, free and humane life are unsurpassed over the whole course of life on this planet. The land we inhabit is physically beautiful, abundant in its capacity to produce the fruits necessary for human fulfillment. We are all formed by a glorious history and ancestry of nobility and purpose.

Yet we must attend to slaughter at the hands of "our own."

All sorts of people across all sorts of media are offering their views on both the causes and cures of this horrible moment. We blame parents, we blame Milosevic, we blame the school system, we blame video games, we blame the NRA,



the moral life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

we blame the entertainment industry, we blame school bullies, we blame the pressures of middle class life, we blame drugs, we blame the history of the Balkans, we blame liberals, Yeltsin and conservatives.

For cures we propose parenting classes, greater security in our schools, the end of NATO, gun control, movie censorship, control of the Internet, political isolationism, school policies that invite students to "turn in" their potentially violent classmates. We propose the use of ground troops overseas, and we seem to be using them in our own schools.

How can a society with so much "going for it" end up so hopelessly mired in suffering because of our own use of violence?

Sorry to say, this column will not solve the dilemma either. I go over in my mind the wealth of moral theology and ethical

deliberation offered over the course of history on the problems of violence and the causes of cultural degeneration. There are no immediate applications or quick fixes. Still, there are hints of understanding found in the reflection of religious people puzzling over the age-old problem of personal and social sinfulness.

I think of one of the most influential books of all time, read and studied by all those who are guided through the study of social ethics, is H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. In this work, Niebuhr proposes five ways in which Christianity has sought to relate to the cultures it inhabits. Two of the five seem particularly enticing as we consider today's American dilemma.

Niebuhr's first model is "Christianity against culture." Here, Christians withdraw from the elements in the surrounding culture that seem opposed to Christian convictions. According to this model, believers construct alternative organizations so that they can remain free of the "taint" of the surrounding culture.

Another of Niebuhr's models is "Christianity transforming culture." Here, Christians work in and with the structures of society, hoping to recast them by infusing them with values that uphold the central convictions of Chris-

tianity.

I think both of these models have something to offer us today. We cannot entirely withdraw from society or become akin to the Amish or other such sectarian groups. If nothing else, our children won't let us! But we do need to consider some sort of media and "influence" censorship for ourselves and our children. We do need to screen television shows and movies, video games and the friends our children take up with. We do need to promote engagement in church communities more actively for our children than our parents did with us. We need to provide an alternative to much of what our society offers us today.

But we also need to be more intentional than previous generations of Catholics have been about exerting a Christian, humane influence at our workplace, in our political involvement, in our participation in the parts of society we inhabit. If we recoil in horror because of this violent moment and do not figure out how we can be a positive part in turning this violent moment of our culture around, we surely will be overcome by the brutality that looks so insurmountable to us today.

Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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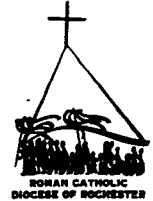
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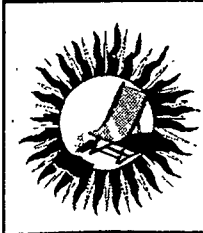
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