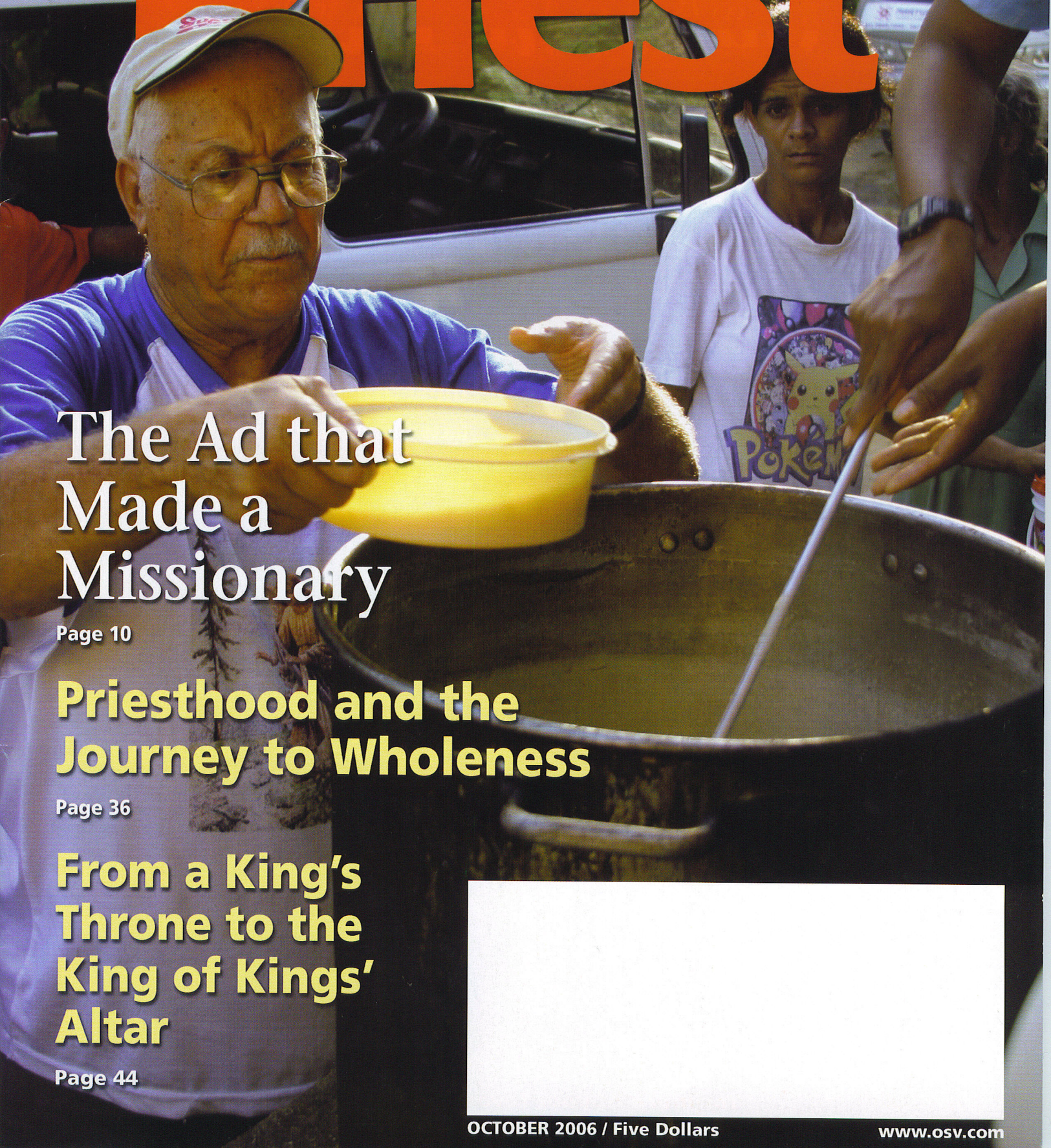


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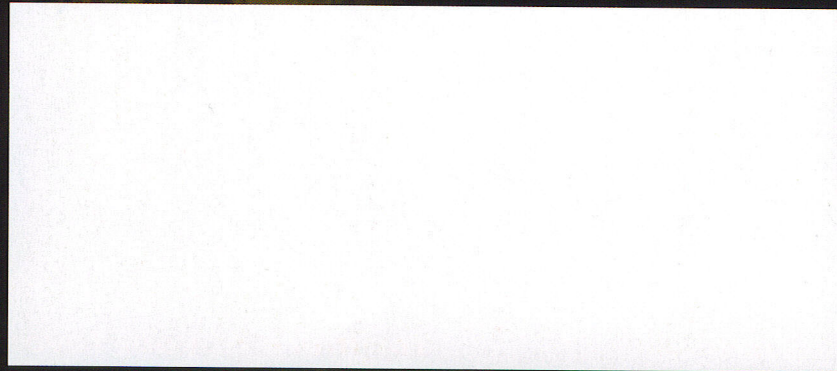
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- Violence begets violence
- The challenge to be peacemakers

# Preaching On the War

## Without sounding unpatriotic

By Richard Hart, O.F.M. Cap.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Next month, another article on the same subject will appear in the pages of *The Priest*.)

**H**ow do preachers take a stand against war without sounding unpatriotic? We might alienate or anger some people, especially those who have loved ones fighting in the Iraq war. But we are at war and we cannot ignore the elephant in our closet. There is bound to be tension between the Gospel's challenge to love our enemies and our country. What effect does the dynamite of the Gospel have on us? As preachers we acknowledge that conflict and differences arise which can be troublesome, but they need to be addressed. If we don't face and embrace this touchy issue, our Christian values might be relegated to irrelevancy.

Most theologians accept the following principles for a just war: just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, last resort, prospect of success, proportionality, and protection of the innocent. These principles have to be prudently applied, and become more difficult and complex with the recent development of international terrorism. In an article in *America* (Oct. 17, 2005) entitled "Postwar Justice" Mark J. Aleman maintains that the just war theory needs to be broadened because of new technology, new kinds of warfare, and a *just post bellum*. The Catholic Church condemns terrorism. His Holiness Pope John Paul II condemned our preemptive

**Wars just don't end as we are finding out in Iraq.**



CNS PHOTO FROM REUTERS

## Some cite Jesus praising the Roman centurion in Matthew's Gospel, but Jesus praised his faith not his profession.

tive strike against Iraq, as well as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. George Lopez, a political science professor at the University of Notre Dame, claims that the current United States policy in Iraq is not morally defensible, whereas a planned withdrawal is.

Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., considers a just war an oxymoron, contradictory words. He has also concluded from two years of personal research, and from many knowledgeable analysts that President Bush's preemptive attack on Iraq was an act of aggression not self defense. The attack lacked international support, wasn't the last resort, the success was not clear and still remains very clouded. We need to study the evidence, learn from knowledgeable people, and pray for proper discernment. Above all, we as preachers have to be careful not to label others as "unpatriotic" who disagree with us, especially where a family has lost a loved one. I read of a peace group in Little Falls, Minnesota, that was angrily confronted by a mother of a young man from the city who had been killed in a roadside

bombing in Iraq.

Supporters of war do so on the basis of "national security" which becomes a powerful motivation for building a scaffold of justification. Some even use the example of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple area. That certainly is a stretch when one considers hydrogen and saturation bombing. Some cite Jesus praising the Roman centurion in Matthew's Gospel (8:5-13), but Jesus praised his faith not his profession. Jesus insisted on turning the other cheek and loving our enemies, which definitely is a case against war. Jesus also said, "Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Mt 26:52).

### Any Good in War?

Back in the '70s there was a popular protest song by Edwin Starr entitled, "War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing." Of course, not everyone will

agree because families are often torn apart by wars that are and were waged. So as preachers how do we approach the

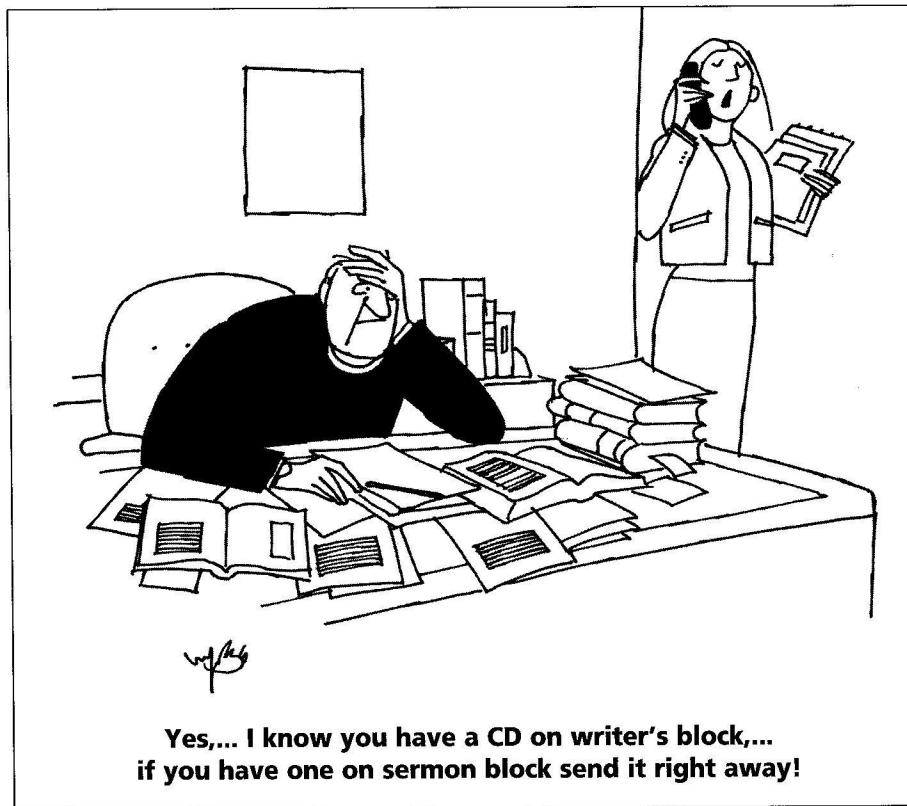
topic of war? One of the issues that needs to be addressed is the cost of human lives. Over 2,300 American service people now in Iraq have been killed, not counting the Iraqis. Maybe the answer to the song is, "Nothing but broken hearts and misery."

World War I was suppose to end all wars with casualties over four million. But it only planted the seeds for World War II with about 25 million who died. What was accomplished by the Korean War and the Vietnam War? Is war the best way to confront the challenges that face our nation? We are now engaged in a war on terrorism. Isn't it ironic that at one time in 1980s Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were our allies? How quickly events change, especially since Sept. 11, 2001. Recall how the Jewish people were crying out "Hosanna to the Son of David" when Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and a few days later they were screaming, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

Wars just don't end as we are finding out in Iraq, or as we are witnessing with the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Wars drain our economic resources. We have poured hundreds of billions of dollars into Iraq and still the country remains a quagmire of unrest. Now we don't have the money for our schools, provide medical insurance for all citizens — 45 million have none. What are we going to do about rising hospital costs and pharmaceutical drugs? Our highways, bridges, and tunnels need extensive overhaul, but we are told the money is not available. We spent \$500,000 per day for the Vietnam war instead of waging war on poverty. We don't deploy enough troops in Iraq, and also not enough to patrol our borders against illegal drugs and immigrants. The hurricanes Katrina and Rita have also sapped our economy.

The poor in Africa are being crucified. The fact that 1.2 billion live on less than \$1 a day is indeed a scandal of



giant proportions. 40 million are afflicted with HIV and often without any medical help. We have plenty for war but not for the poor. In the film "Crimson Tide," Denzil Washington says, "In the nuclear age the true enemy is not the opponent in the fight. The true enemy is war itself." War is an evil part of our social order. Zechariah said, "Not by an army nor by might, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts"(4:6), Micah (4:3) and Isaiah (2:4) declared that the time will come

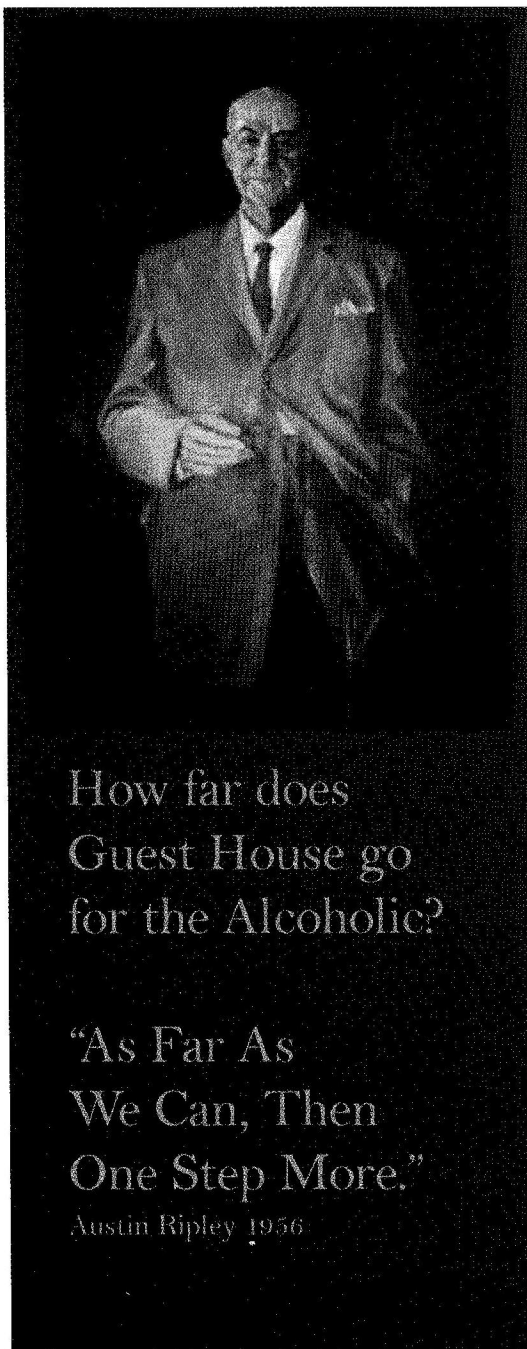
when nations will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. One nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again." Will that day ever come? Peace is discovered in the arms that hold, not in the arms used for war.

**Just War**

Niebuhr never used the term "just war" in his writings. No war is really just but some wars might be justified.

He insisted that all of us are sinners and in need of redemption. The "axis of evil" in modern terminology can be true of most nations. Niebuhr had an appreciation of nonviolent action. Gandhi wrote a letter to Hitler but never got an answer. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote one to Eisenhower and he sent federal troops to protect his actions. Niebuhr opposed the war in Vietnam. What would he say about Iraq or our struggle with terrorism?

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man once said, "War is hell." A soldier's purpose is to kill the enemy and this mentality makes war a hell. John F. Kennedy stated that "Mankind must put an end to war or war will put an end to mankind." This is more true today because of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. We need to ask our congregations, are we winning the war on terrorism by becoming terrorists ourselves? Another crucial question is how are we to live in a world of seven billion people without violating one another? We need to do what Mother Teresa did, "See Jesus in the face of the poor" and thereby see the sacredness of every person. Jesus demonstrated this in his short life on earth, and challenges us to do the same.

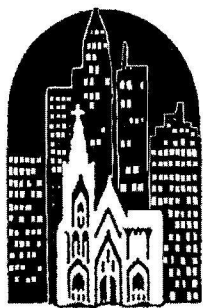
Violence begets violence and the cycle continues. Dorothy Day maintained that the violence of war cannot be reconciled with the Gospel of peace. No peace exists with some degree of vulnerability. It takes much courage to

halt the cycle of violence. Non violence does not embrace weakness or being a wimp. Turning one's cheek does not mean surrender, but means I am not returning the mistreatment received. Wars often result from people who want to be in control of other people. Jesus as Lord and King calls us to a higher level of non violence. The story is told of Queen Elizabeth II that when she was showing some friends around Buckingham Palace she came to her father's library, King George VI. She pointed to a picture of Jesus on the wall and said, "That is the person my father says is the real King." True discipleship of Jesus means to confront those in authority with love and a higher calling. Counteracting violence means sharing the cross with Christ. The alternative to war is a lifestyle of love which breaks down barriers creating "one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace" (Eph 2:15).

Some scholars maintain that

Germany has become a nation of pacifism because of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's inspirational writings and death. He was convinced that Hitler posed the greatest threat to society in the 20th century. Bonhoeffer's resistance to war was so vehement that he advocated closing all the churches if war broke out. He said, "The Church of Christ stands against war; it stands for peace among people, between nations, classes and races."

He insisted on how God was a God of peace. For him war was a total disregard and denial of Christ's teachings. He asked church leaders to speak out as one voice against the atrocities of war and to preach the Sermon on the Mount. He decried the fact that the leaders were offering "cheap grace" rather than Jesus' challenge to be peacemakers, willing to lay down their lives. They had caved into Hitler's plea for patriotism. Hitler had made his war into a crusade especially against atheis-



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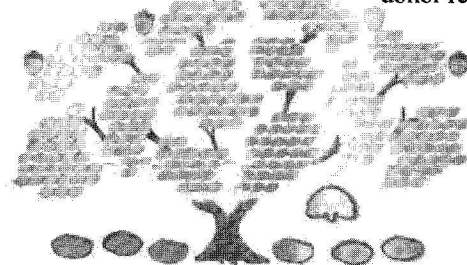
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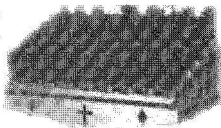
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tic Bolshevism. People had replaced Hitler for Jesus Christ! In his book *Confessions of Guilt*, which he never finished, he asked the churches to confess their guilt of allowing the exploitation of the poor while enriching the strong, the suffering of countless innocent people. His last recorded words were: "This is the end of me, the beginning of life." What would the world look like had his words and efforts been heeded? What would he say to us preachers today?

Isn't there a way of resolving disputes without going to war? Peace is possible if enough people are committed to non violence like Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Oscar Romero. War in recent times has left sixty nations and millions of people devastated by its violence and trauma. How many victims of war are now in need of medical, psychological and pastoral care because of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? One of every

four returning soldier suffers some mental, physical, psychological problem which range from war wounds to thoughts of suicide. Some have said that they would be "better off dead." Even preaching about this might cause pain to some soldiers, but hopefully through love, care and prayer these victims can recover from the trauma of violence. Certainly risks are involved in presenting traumatic experiences, but greater risks are involved by remaining silent. Traumatic secrets often leak out of the most hermetically sealed containers after years of careful protection. Many of our service people do not want to see "Saving Private Ryan" or "Band of Brothers" when everyone else raved about the movies. Soldiers never forget the first person they kill. Freud referred to it as a "screen memory." Killing their own or innocent civilians is even more devastating, and often haunts them for the rest of their lives. A soldier becomes an angel and a demon at the same time.

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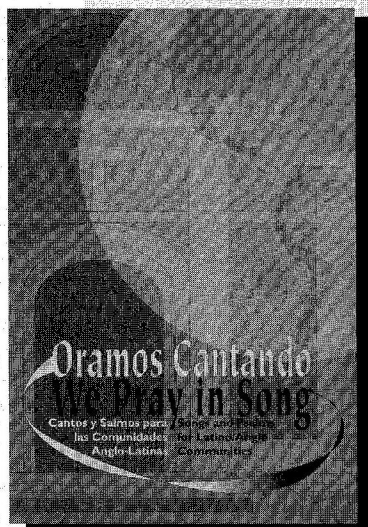
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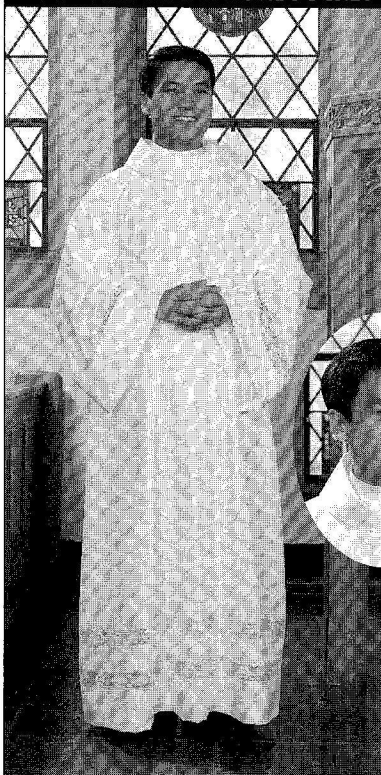
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They bear emotional and spiritual scars the rest of their lives often too painful to tell. What is the adage, "When you kill another, you also kill part of yourself?" Even when we glory in defeating an enemy we fail to comprehend all the damage done to ourselves, especially our soldiers. When we brag, "We won," we lose.

### **War and Its Futility**

The worst aspect of our misadventure in Iraq is its futility. The stench of death continues from previous wars. But why aren't we shouting out into the halls of power? Where is our outrage? How many more individuals must die before we say, "Enough, that's enough?" So we preachers need to face this thorny issue because the future of our world hangs in the balance. We need more individuals like a Gandhi, a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., an Oscar Romero, a Mother Teresa, and above all the example of Jesus who advocated non violence. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. asserted, "The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are a poor chisel for carving out peaceful tomorrows."

Gerard Powers maintains that the most critical question we need to ask is: What do we owe the Iraqis, not when and if we withdraw? Colin Powell expressed it well, "You break it, you own it." We cannot resolve the conflict of war, but we preachers can challenge others how we are to love our country and love our enemies as well. They will take different and often opposing positions, but we don't ignore these differences. We acknowledge them and help them to deal honestly with them. Maybe the seed that is planted, which is God's Word, will be nurtured and kept alive for the day when there will be no more war. As his holiness of happy memory, Pope John Paul II said, "Another world is possible." **P**

**FATHER HART, O.F.M. Cap., is the director of preaching for the St. Joseph Province of the Capuchins. He has written articles for Pastoral Life, Human Development, and Teacher's Journal.**