

Letters to the editor

http://www.stltoday.com/news/opinion/mailbag/letters-to-the-editor-january/article_91eec166-d35b-5469-bec7-29305e5e2fd7.html

Letters to the editor, January 17

Jan 17, 2011

Why is it different?

I appreciate the thoughtful, objective approach presented in the commentary "Cause, effect and Tucson" (Jan. 13) by Michael Shermer. While I agree that there is often a hysterical, emotional response to national events, I can't agree that events such as in Tucson, Columbine, Oklahoma City and Kirkwood are inevitable.

I wonder why these shootings occur more often and with more severe results than in other developed nations. If "randomness" of these catastrophes is simply "at play," why are Canada and Europe more immune from the same probabilities. Violence does occur there sometimes. However, the frequency and severity of these events in our country is a sign, in my opinion, that we should pause and consider cause and effect.

In short, I don't believe that Mr. Shermer's scientific response adequately addresses the "universe" of inquiry. To be better, we need to ask why the United States is different.

Thomas I. Rich • Glendale

Exploiting hatred

Reaction to the shooting in Tucson, Ariz., has been interesting. Such experts as the sheriff of Pima County, Ariz., and the noted economist Paul Krugman wasted no time in deciding it was the result of intemperate political speech.

It is becoming clearer that evil arising from untreated mental illness is the more probable cause. Who knows what external realities penetrated that sick mind. It could have been one or more of the "CSI" television shows or other violent entertainment. Even more probable is the internal constructions of an imbalanced mind.

Many serious policy considerations can be explored in due time: gun control, treatment of mental illness, identification and monitoring of persons with serious mental problems and the appropriate security for the public, including public officials.

One thing is eminently clear: There is an element in our political and cultural leadership that does not hesitate to cynically use any situation to exploit a reservoir of hatred for political opponents. And these leaders are smart enough to know better — unless they too are blinded by hatred and paranoia.

John G. Horen • St. Louis

Dreamers

The editorial, "Claiming the Constitution" (Jan. 12) was an excellent starting point for a much-needed discussion on the Constitution's relevance to today's issues.

The Framers of our great national treasure dreamed of the simpler issues they faced at the nation's beginning. The 27 ratified amendments allude to its fluidity. The Constitution wasn't and isn't set in concrete.

The dreamers never dreamed immigrants would come from countries other than the most western shores of Europe. The dreamers never dreamed the nation would be ripped apart by Civil War. The dreamers never dreamed of huge hospitals, health insurance or a health-related industry. The dreamers never dreamed of borders vulnerable to invasions of illegal immigrants, even though the dreamers entered open borders. The dreamers never dreamed women and former slaves would vote. The dreamers never dreamed the right to bear arms would result in a nation flooded with semi-automatic guns that contribute to heinous crimes.

Nevertheless, the dreamers did dream of liberty to most, justice to most, domestic tranquility to most, a common defense to most and the general welfare of most — just not to all. The dreamers dreamed big, but couldn't dream of the total picture.

Today, we need dreamers who envision the present and near future as they did. We need dreamers who consider "all," not just "the most." The nation needs dreamers who care more about the nation as a whole than a limited segment of the nation.

And such dreamers will need the prayers of the rest of us.

Helen Louise Herndon • St. Peters

Chaplain shortage

Regarding "Military chaplains are faith mismatch" (Jan. 9): In the early 1960s, I was stationed at Keflavik air base, Iceland. For six months of my one-year tour, we did not have a Catholic chaplain. The Lutheran pastor there did his best for us, but he was aware that he could not provide the sacraments and say Mass.

The lack of Catholic chaplains is less about anti-war sentiments and more about the shortage of priests in the United States. Priests can be assigned to the military only by their respective bishops, and the bishops may be reluctant to release priests who are badly needed in a diocese.

To compound the problem, the chief chaplain of the Navy has decided to enforce the retirement age of 62 for chaplains. This affects Catholics more than any other group. It has caused a great problem for the understaffed Catholic chaplaincy.

Mel Doerhoff • St. Louis

Mixed messages

We Catholics must confront the church's mixed messages regarding credibly accused religious order priests. "Priest fights accusation of abuse in Bangladesh" (Jan. 13) shows the contradictions in church spheres.

On the one hand, as stated by Vicar General Monsignor Vernon Gardin, members of religious orders operate outside diocesan control. On the other, the church, as signaled by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, steps in at points and strips order priests, such as William Christensen, of their power by laicization. When the church finally takes action (sometimes years after credible accusations surface), truly dangerous characters may have been left to their own devices.

When will Catholics demand accountability on the part of religious orders as well as other Catholic bodies? Amazingly, the church does not mandate that religious orders comply with uniform child safety codes. Many orders uphold quality standards, but no church entity oversees their separate, and often lenient, review boards.

Church leaders should deal equally with diocesan and religious order priests, or they might as well scrap child safety efforts overall. With no even enforcement, credibly accused priests slip through the cracks between diocesan and religious order protocol. Case in point: Robert Osborne, another credibly accused and unchecked Marianist whom the Archdiocese finally had to bar from parish involvement.

Linda Briggs-Harty • Webster Groves

Not open, not transparent

Regarding "Priest fights accusation of abuse in Bangladesh" (Jan. 13): The next time someone suggests that Catholic officials now handle clergy sex cases, consider this: In 2002, The Rev. William Christensen and the Marianists are sued for clergy sex crimes and cover-ups. Catholic officials don't recall him from Bangladesh. They don't suspend him. They don't announce an investigation. They don't reach out to see if others were hurt by him. They refuse to accept service of the lawsuit on his behalf. They know the victim has brain cancer and may be dying. They keep refusing to accept service, delaying the case for five years. They keep Mr. Christensen in active ministry around unsuspecting, vulnerable families.

In 2007, they get other reports of child sex allegations from the 1990s. In 2008, they claim they'll investigate. At some point, they secretly deem the allegations credible, but stay silent. At some point, they secretly start defrocking him, but stay silent. At some point, he's officially defrocked, but they stay silent. At some point, he sues one of his accusers, but they stay silent. We learn about the Bangladesh allegations and Mr. Christensen's defrocking.

Remember all those pledges by top Catholic officials to be "open and transparent" in child sex abuse cases? Recall all those promises by bishops to put the safety of children first? Remember all those policies and plans and public relations efforts about reform in the top church echelons?

It looks like those were just empty words.

David Clohessy • St. Louis Director of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests