

## *From the Kitchen*

4 May 2011



In human societies we make laws based on a set of principles which express how we feel about personal autonomy, freedom, power, individual rights and responsibilities, honesty, integrity, access to food and shelter, health and wellbeing and about the value of life itself. Why do we do this?

One reason I can see for this making of laws is that we attempt to curb behaviour that, unrestricted, would have us behave like animals. Yet, though we set out principles by which we should live, we also write into our laws what appear to be exceptions to those principles. When we make exceptions, we tell ourselves that we have good reasons for them. Thus, we have a general rule that people must not be deprived of their liberty, but we do lock people up as punishment, or in order to rehabilitate them, or to prevent them doing harm to themselves or others. We have a principle that is upheld in most countries that a person's life is sacrosanct and anyone who kills another person must be punished. But in some of those same countries people will be put to death by the State for breaking one or other law.

It is curious that some States will condone, even facilitate the assassination of individuals while talking of the sanctity of human life and condemning other States which facilitate or carry out assassinations. There is always an attempt at justification and the justification relies on words.

It is through words that the debates are conducted which lead to the laws by which we are governed. Those laws are expressed in words which are chosen carefully. We use words to teach our children, including teaching them about the principles by which they should live and about the laws which govern their behaviour. What must they make of the words "you shall not kill another human being" and then the words "he deserved to be killed because of the terrible things he has done"? If a child who has heard all those words feels aggrieved by someone's actions and determines to punish that person, they are told that they must not take the law into their own hands and that they should have dealt with it according to the law. How can a child reconcile such a discrepancy? How do adults reconcile it?

Most countries purport to uphold the rule of law, which includes the rule that a person is innocent until proven guilty. What then are we to make of leaders in those countries publicly voicing their pleasure (even jubilation) when someone is summarily killed instead of captured to be brought before a court of law, and the pleasure being expressed with words amounting to "he was obviously guilty of heinous crimes and therefore he deserved to die and the world is a better place because he was killed"? If political leaders (many of whom are lawyers) can show so little regard for the basic principles of the rule of law, what can be expected of simple citizens?

Unfortunately, this discrepancy between principles and behaviour is all too common. People who belong to the Church (i.e. committed followers of Christianity) are taught adherence to a small number of basic principles of behaviour and then see clergymen (rarely women) blatantly break those principles, with disastrous consequences for the victims of those breaches (the same applies in other religions). Children may be brought up with very strict rules of behaviour and then witness their parents themselves breaking those rules with apparent impunity. We hear our leaders loudly condemn corruption in other countries and then we read how rife corruption is within institutions in our own country.

In the face of all this, it is a challenge to bring up children and guide them to adulthood believing in right thought and right action and feeling confident enough in themselves to live with integrity and to uphold important principles. It is so easy for them to become cynical as they observe the actions of others and hear their words. It takes a great deal of self-assurance to be able to navigate through all this and not end up damaged. This, the building of self-assurance along with humour and humility, is the most important task facing every parent, teacher, community and spiritual leader and politician. It is our failure to do *this* that is degrading our society, more than the growth of such lamentable tendencies as the growing prevalence of pornography, the sexualisation of almost everything and the increasing depiction of violence in entertainment media; although it is likely that these lamentable tendencies are themselves a result of our failure to produce adults who are capable of and willing to act with integrity.