

Journeys

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'Boys and my rabbit'

What do seventh and eighth graders think about nuclear war?

The issue was the focus of a conference at St. Augustine's elementary school recently. More than 150 people—including teachers, principals, and a few parents—from Catholic schools in Rochester and vicinity gathered to hear speakers and watch films.

The speakers included Andrew Thomas, Director of the Center for Dispute Settlement, Inc., who explained—through the use of examples—the small ways conflicts get started, and the ways they are sometimes resolved.

Father William Cuddy, from Syracuse, told the story of a child their age, Sadako Sasaki, a

survivor of the Hiroshima bomb.

Legend had it that a crane lived to be a thousand years old and if a sick woman folded 1000 cranes then the gods would grant her wish to be healthy again. "She was only able to fold 644 cranes before leukemia claimed her life," Cuddy said. "Her classmates folded 356 more, and (the cranes) were buried with the child. In Hiroshima today there is a statue of her, holding a crane, and the words: 'This is our cry. This is our prayer for world peace.'"

Jerry Berrigan, elder brother of Philip and Daniel Berrigan, had also come from Syracuse. He told the students to spiritually clasp hands with seventh and eighth graders from around the world. The conference was a lot like career day, since peacemaking is also a career—"a way of life."

At the conference prayer service, Prof. William Sullivan, from St. John Fisher College, reminded the children that at the heart of the Christian faith is the admonition to love one's enemies.

The conference took place in the school basement, the same basement that an earlier generation—like sheep—practiced nuclear alerts by rushing down, covering their heads, reciting the rosary. Children of that generation seldom heard priests or professors talk about children who died from war, about peacemaking as a vocation, about Jesus as a nonviolent resister.

The same basement that had been a place of momentary terror was decorated now with flowers, with quotations such as one from A.J. Muste: "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way." There was the American flag, small flags from other nations stuck together in a flower pot, books on peace, paper cut-outs of children holding hands. On one side of the room was an electric Bingo sign; on the other, a world map with the United States at its center.

Not all of the students had come to the conference out of an interest in peace. "It was a day off from schoolwork," admitted one. Another was avoiding a dreaded Spanish test. A 14-year-old girl confessed: "My mother said that it would be good for me to." A few students said it was "required by Mr. Graham" (Robert Graham, a junior high school teacher at St. Augustine's, had organized the conference).

But there were other motivations. "I came to hear about peace," said one child. Another had come "to listen to what the adults that talked about peace really had to say." "To be a part of a peaceful community," said a boy from St. Agnes' in Avon.

Pre-television age children could be shielded from all but the most crucial news from afar, but these days the world truly is a global village. Children talk about the explosion of the space shuttle, the bombing raid on Libya, the meltdown at Chernobyl. And they speak more

vaguely about "all the mean things going on," about the United States "always arguing with other countries," about the "boundaries between ourselves and Russia." Such things, they say, frighten them and make them think a nuclear war might start. Wrote one child: "Things get worse everyday in the world and at this rate there'll be war."

A child from St. Helen's said that nuclear war is unlikely "because I can't cope with dying." A Corpus Christi student said nuclear war is unlikely "because I want a future."

A small proportion of students said they have had dreams about a nuclear war. "I was in a fall-out shelter with lots of people crying," said one boy of his dream. "I felt sick." A 14-year-old from St. Anne's wrote: "It was really sad because I was the only one left on earth." One boy, who said he felt "at ease being a class clown," said: "I had a dream that I was an onlooker of WWII and I saw the people burned to death, the devastation and the pain people went through."

A 32-year-old teacher at St. Jerome's said she has had dreams about nuclear war and "in all of them I can never find my husband. I always reach out but can never grab him. Sometimes it's like a giant mudslide—everything cracks, separates, and everyone is falling into eternity."

A few children said they would commit suicide if a nuclear war started—a disturbing thought in that crises in the news makes many of them think quickly that a nuclear war is about to begin. "I would end my life so I don't have to go through the suffering of all the nuclear particles," said one.

"If the missiles were launched," said another, "I would try to do as much as I hadn't been able to do in my lifetime then I would go to Point Zero."

"I would stay in the house," said another, "and I would kiss my mom and say I see you in heaven." "Stay with my parents—say stuff I couldn't say before," said a boy from St. Anne's.

What did they think the world would look like after a nuclear war?

"The world would look like it was over-cooked," said a girl from St. Thomas the Apostle. One child wrote simply: "Flat, plain, burnt, ruined, sad." "A large graveyard," said another.

"Just dirt, no plants or animals and a orange sky," wrote a boy from Our Lady of Good Counsel. "The way it was before God put things on the world," said a girl from St. Andrew's. "The world would die slowly, like a plant pulled from the earth," said one child.

Asked what they would miss, they named "my clothes," "going to high school," "parties and laughing carelessly," "teachers," "going for rides around the Finger Lakes," "Mr. Graham."

And one child, caught between two worlds, said she'd miss "boys and my rabbit."

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