

The Loss of Innocence

By DENNIS APEL

"I don't get it. What is the connection between protesting I.C.B.M. launches at Vandenberg and doing service for the poor in Guadalupe?" I was speaking with a 61-year-old, Italian-born professor from Georgetown University. She seemed genuinely interested in understanding. We were at a dinner party in Washington, D.C. hosted by friends of my cousin and his wife who had graciously given us hospitality while there. The group gathered for dinner was very international because, well, it was Washington, D.C. Every-one there was excited and interested because in a couple days I would be sitting before the 9 Justices of the Supreme Court. My lawyer, Erwin Chemerinsky, would argue the case for why my First Amendment rights had been violated when the Security Forces at Vandenberg Air Force Base arrested me for vigiling on the public highway outside the main gate of the Base.

So... I tried to explain to her how our country spends more on "defense" than all of our allies put together (over \$600 billion per year). That doesn't even count our Nuclear Program whose budget falls under the Department of Energy. Meanwhile, Rozella and Thomas have more chil-dren in their classes every year as money for teachers diminishes while our defense budget increases. This while the people we live and work with in Guadalupe live below the Federal poverty level working 10-12 hours a day, six days a week in the fields. And the indigenous people of the Marshall Islands have had their lives and lands changed forever by our continued irradiation of their islands and lagoons by our above-ground nuclear testing followed by decades of missile testing using depleted uranium warheads. Every time Vandenberg fires off an I.C.B.M., the windows in our house rattle and another \$50 million is spent in the 20 minutes it takes for that missile to deliver its warhead to the lagoon in Kwajalein Atoll, while we feed people who need food even though they spend their lives working to feed us.

"Well, if we spent less money on defense, it doesn't automatically follow that that money would then be spent on infrastructure or schools." I have to admit, she had me there. Maybe she was right. Maybe I have been looking at it all wrong. Maybe there is no connection between our insane military budget and the increasing economic disparity in our society, the "war" economy and the "poor" economy. Maybe our paranoid, obsessive/compulsive and idolatrous dependence on bigger and better weapons and longer and messier wars has no connection to our rapidly deteriorating ability to be human in our interactions and relationships with our neighbors. I don't know. But, having long ago set out on the path of service and resistance, it seems late in the game to turn around now.

We had our "day in court" at the Supreme Court. What an eye-opener! In retrospect I want to cut myself some slack for not guessing in advance that it would go the way it went. I mean, I have been immersed in this culture now for 63 years. Of course I would

imagine that the high-est court in the land would be interested, above all, in pre-serving the Constitution. Given my years of indoctrination in the myth of blind justice, I could be excused for not realizing that things are not what we like to believe they are. But still, I came away feeling like I had been duped. Who would have imagined that, in the Supreme Court of all places, Erwin Chemerinsky, a certified icon in the field of Constitutional Law, after numerous attempts at raising the First Amendment issue and being shut down could state that he had the right to bring it up and would receive the follow-ing response: (quoting Justice Antonin Scalia verbatim) "You can bring it, but that doesn't mean we have to listen to it!"

Because of the generosity of our supporters, our whole community (myself, Tensie, Rozella, Thomas and Jorge) were able to go to the hearing. I have to admit to having some sadness that the children had to witness the atmosphere of the proceedings. I suppose I would want them not to lose their innocence so early in life. Al-though I also have to admit it's no picnic losing it this late in life. To watch Justices Scalia and Thomas leaning back in their high-top leather chairs, whispering to each other and laughing while oral arguments were going on, or to see the genuine disinterest for the issues in the case that were hammered out in hours of research and discussion, was an almost classic picture of power and its disdain for the "rabble." There were times when I thought that the only thing missing from the scene was a roast leg of lamb in their hands. But, perhaps it was just another in a long line of losses of innocence for the children (and me). After all, we live a Catholic Worker life. You can't do that very long before realizing that the world being fed us by corporate America is as contrived as the world in the Truman Show. The kids will survive. I pray that I will.

I feel like I have been to Jerusalem and back. The seat of power is as real today as it was 2,000 years ago. Power will have its way because it can, whether it be to order the slaughter of the innocents in order to head off any competition, or to squash the voices of dissent in order to continue its drive toward world domination. And the paranoia is so great in the mind of the powerful that a serious threat can be imagined in the form of an infant lying in the feeding trough of a stable or an aging activist holding a poster board on a highway. The Supreme Court building almost looks like a temple now that I think of it. So here we are again, celebrating Christmas and contemplating the mystery of throwing in with a prophet who preaches powerlessness as a response to power. The Way, the Truth and the Life are laid out for us in the birth of Jesus. Love is the Way, love is the Truth and love is the Life. Power is not in the mix. And any attempt to overcome power with power is death. Our God is Love. And only in that Love will we find eternal life.