

# Honor, Decency, Integrity

Brother John

*The following letter was printed in the Rutland Herald in early November. We share it with you, in the hope that the questions it asks may invite us all to a critical change in perspective regarding the tragedy unfolding daily in Iraq.*

As a monk I am committed to a non-partisan approach to politics. As a life-long resident and citizen in this amazing State of Vermont, I recognize the responsibility to take a stand and cast my ballot on issues that bear on the common good.

My father, Bill Hammond, was coach and teacher at Cathedral High School in Burlington, Vermont for more than thirty years. He instituted the first Vermont State basketball tournament and coached Cathedral High to the first State Basketball Championship in the 1920's. He didn't separate his role as coach from his role as teacher-competition from values. He taught that it was not the worst thing to suffer defeat in conflict; that it was better to lose with honor and integrity than to win with dishonor. His teaching was put to the test when he became a Vermont state politician in later life.

As I go to the polls and cast my ballot at this moment in our history as a nation, I sense that Bill Hammond's teaching is still highly relevant. Is victory necessarily preferable to defeat in the conflict in Iraq? There is broad agreement that it was a mistake to engage in the war. Must we be winners at any cost? Is it demeaning, dishonorable, to admit that we made a mistake, that we were wrong? To win, arguments are presented to defend torture, to deprive people of basic rights, and to engage in the very actions that we condemn in our enemy.

To free ourselves from the quagmire will be no easy task. To find our way out may take the Wisdom of Solomon, but one thing appears evident: the solution will not be military victory. We are forced to look creatively for solutions elsewhere-perhaps in diplomacy, but more likely in respect and social engagement with cultures far different from our own. The endless quest to be the most powerful and dominant force in the world only leads to further conflict with those who gladly compete for the same dominant position.

In a nation where religion holds a place of honor, I hope that spiritual values gain a hearing. The loss of precious human lives is incalculable in material terms. The death and injuries of countless innocent non-combatants, the dying and suffering of brave and loyal soldiers, the unimaginable financial costs that drain human services like healthcare, education, and care for the poor, place a paralyzing despair and burden on the population. Astronomical expenditures for the war will oppress future generations with heavy taxation for years to come.

Addressing all people of good will, the voice of Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) rings out loud and clear. In his address to the United Nations, Pope Paul VI demanded: "No more war; war never again." The universally respected John Paul II questioned whether a "just war" is possible in our times with the attendant danger of nuclear weapons, wanton destruction and loss of human life, and the social upheaval that is involved.

From this perspective, peace is not linked to military victory and world domination but to works of justice with honor and integrity. These are not pious abstractions but involve honesty, respect for the rights, freedom, and lives of others, and a willingness to listen to those who differ with us. I doubt that we can find the perfect politician. (Even my dad did not qualify for that!) We are faced with many issues in a

complex world, but the critical issues of our time demand a high degree of honor, decency and integrity in both politicians and those who vote for them. Hopefully a thoughtful electorate will sort out the issues from the political hype and invective and put in place politicians who value honor above victory.

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