

## *The Texts of the Convivium*

### **WHY IS THERE STILL SO MUCH VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD?**

The world is marching towards civilization, although not without some difficulty.

He who no longer believes in heroism and saintliness pursues the ideal of civilization, the ideal of “being civil”, of “behaving like a civil person”, as the new ethics and title of prestige.

Needless to say conflicts and differences do exist, but they should be peacefully and “civilly” resolved. Civilization is against violence. Following in the footsteps of Christ and Gandhi, civilization preaches “non violence”, which is also applied to political actions.

When faced with an inclination that is becoming increasingly clearer, one is led to asking oneself a somewhat sorrowful question: why is there still so much violence in the world?

A “violent instinct” lies within each and every one of us humans: something that is stronger than us, something we cannot seem to extinguish. Every now and then this violence is unexpectedly unleashed from deep down inside of us.

In Latin the word “persona” means “mask”. A respectable and honest person is a sort of mask, in which we find ourselves locked away as if in a shell. All of a sudden this shell opens and the respectable, well-bred, rational and calm person pops out like a cork, and what comes gushing forth is a torrent of anger and evil that has been cooped up and suppressed for too long.

This is how fights, bloody feuds arise, not to mention increasingly devastating wars that culminated in the two world wars last century, followed by somewhat smaller but no less ferocious wars this century. Hate for anything foreign or different could lead to pogroms, to “ethnic cleansing”, to genocides. This horrific scenario is supplemented by all forms of massacre, slaughter and torture. Finally there is a more episodic and private violence linked to crime.

All this induces us to the conclusion that the instinct of violence has to be extremely difficult to stamp out. The most persuasive explanation is that this kind of instinct is a part of human nature and before them ingrained in the animal species we have progressed from through evolution or which, starting from a common stock, continue their existence in parallel.

Excluding of course all herbivores, animals eat one another. They escape from their destiny of being eaten either by camouflaging themselves or by defending themselves “fighting tooth and nail”. According to the popular saying the best form of defence is attack. Both those who defend as well as those who attack have to be armed with violence. Practice makes arms of violence increasingly more efficacious. Right from the moment in which the animal begins to grow it is sent to the school of violence.

The animal not only defends his own life but also his own territory. One cold winter morning a sparrow entered our house and stayed there for a long period of time in freedom. (I’ve told this tale in a particular chapter of my memories, which the curious reader can find in the index of the Italian edition on our website).

Anyway, in the evening, when it was time to go to bed, we sent our little sparrow off to sleep in a little nest we had made from an old towel laid out on a clothes stand in the bathroom. We used to turn all the lights in the house out leaving only the bathroom light on and our little feathered friend flew boldly up into his nest to settle down for the night.

Sometimes I used to enjoy teasing him by poking my finger at him. However at this point, the sparrow seemed to have completely forgotten all the kindness showed to him during the day by acting in defence, in which case my poor finger came out the worse as it was very often, and rightly so, quite viciously pecked.

The little bird took on a nasty and extremely angry expression. This was his moment of fierce violence, aimed at defending his territory.

Even though you may be on friendly terms with a female dog it's always better to avoid giving the impression – needless to say, without doing it on purpose – of being a danger to her puppies. Furthermore, be careful never to take a bone off a dog while he's gnawing at it!

This instinct of violence aimed at defending one's life, territory, property or food, could suddenly unleash itself without warning and transform man's best friend into a proud enemy.

If we move on to consider mankind, there very often comes a time in which a group finds it has to defend itself from other groups who threaten to rob it of all its possessions and reduce it to subjection and – if the worst comes to the worst – reduce it to slavery or even make it an object of ethnic cleansing.

And so we have the need to train warriors. And likewise to increase our warlike spirit. Nourishing it with seemingly convenient prejudices, which identify the group's cause with the cause of good and the others' with evil or at least with disvalue.

This need to defend oneself from the others or to attack them, dominate them, colonize them and humiliate them, was strongly felt by the Europeans right up until the middle of the last century. Nobody felt safe, since it was as if a war could break out at any given moment.

Nowadays Europe seems to have come to its senses: its people tend to be more closely federate. However the situation is completely different in other parts of the world. Therefore one can say that in those parts of the world military training and the use of weapons, war education and the increase of warlike spirits still represent a sad necessity.

But let's focus our attention on Europe. Wars have been abolished here and so too has the warlike spirit; nevertheless the fiery spirits still exist and what's more they are pressing forward with powerful urgency. How can they be unleashed? By inventing new nationalisms and conflicts. The theatre of all this harsh conflicts is above all the world of sport and especially football.

The habit that the triumphant assume is symptomatic, inexplicable and in extremely bad taste and it becomes increasingly more savage when the decisive victory point is scored. Why should they look so ferocious? Wouldn't it be better to look happy and pleased with the outcome? Obviously not: the victory is celebrated with a warlike cry, totally evident of a regression from humanity to the wildest animal nature.

Then we mustn't forget the mass brutishness, that finds its battle fields in football stadiums, where the apocalypse of flames and fire remind one of the most shocking images of modern warfare. These manifestations of violence are anything but innocuous, associated, as they often are, with blows with fists and bars to the "sound of truncheons", with many injuries some even fatal.

Violence is increasing amongst school children, between the destruction of precious material and property, episodes of "bullying" and the persecution of the weaker children in which they are robbed of their possessions and money. Violence also takes on a more subtle and psychological form in the work environment with "mobbing".

There's violence against animals. It is expressed in intensive farming, where the animal is exploited without taking into consideration all the suffering such wretched beings are subjected to. I prefer to pass over in silence all the torture inflicted through vivisection.

Man's cruelty to animals is already expressed during childhood. O our dear innocent children! Here they are torturing lizards, frogs, insects and other defenceless creatures, destroying nests and killing their delightful little inhabitants.

A holy priest, teacher and dean of an ecclesiastical university, once confessed to me that as a child he used to enjoy cutting off cats' whiskers. "But Monsignor, what are you telling me!"

As a young boy I was never really cruel to animals, but if we ever had a cat or dog at home I used to enjoy teasing it, annoying it, getting a lot of well deserved scratches and bites in return.

I never used to think that also this kind of "cruelty", if you like, against God's creatures could be a form of pestering and extremely annoying nastiness. Then I understood it so much that

nowadays I prefer to stroke them, earning purrs and other effusions and demonstrations of kindness in return.

I remember one time when I was doing military service, I tried to save a harmless snake during one of our exercises in the country. My companions wanted to kill the snake at all costs with an axe they had found nearby. I grabbed the axe off them to stop them from killing the poor creature, but those dear boys tricked me into giving it back and wasted no time at all in hacking the snake into small pieces. I scolded them but they paid no attention whatsoever to my vaguely Franciscan message that I was trying to get over to them.

I remember the face one of the boys made: he was staring at the snake almost as if he were possessed and his nostrils were literally flaring. I'm no expert but I'd imagine that many torturers assume the same kind of expression whilst performing such grim and ghastly acts, out of which they get immense pleasure.

I think that instilling at least a pinch of sadism in the training of a violent warrior (exploitable to those aforementioned purposes) must have its sad practical aspects.

I have only ever watched a boxing match when I was a young boy. There were eight fights in all, one each per category. You can only imagine the brutish, beastlike cries that came from the supporters of both fighters. The "fans" of those days went wild as they cheered their favourite on perhaps even giving him some advice. But the sentence they were shouting that shocked me the most was: "We want to see some blood!"

It seems that nobody really minds the sight of blood, except for those who, due to some form of congenital horror, refuse to see it and prefer to be told about it or read about it in the crime pages.

One time, when I was a young boy, I was standing outside my school entrance with my class mates' parents and aunts and uncles, who seemed entirely respectable and tranquil. All of a sudden we heard the loud crash about 100 metres down the road coming from a horrific car crash. At the sound of this sinister signal everyone took off at full speed, running as fast as their shaky legs could take them to the place in which the accident had happened, hoping to get there as fast as possible so as not to miss any of the action.

People also like destructions. In order to save my somewhat poor, jeopardized eyesight, my excellent wife reads a chapter or two from a book to me every day. At the moment she is reading *Istanbul*, written by the Turk Orhan Pamuk. At a certain point the book talks about the fires that did indeed break out in large houses and villas in Istanbul quite frequently.

The news of a burning fire spread all over the city in a matter of seconds. Friends used to summon one another by phone and rush to the scene on foot, by car and even by speedboat. Street sellers would also hurry to the scene to supply the spectators with food and drinks as if they were at the cinema. However not everyone took advantage of the drinks and snacks on sale as they had brought their own sandwiches from home. They used to chat and gossip together as they watched the fire burn away.

Christians themselves – there used to be a lot of them in Istanbul back then – used to accept other people's misfortunes with so much Christian resignation and the Muslims used to perceive the will of Allah with so much devoted fatalism!

It hardly seems necessary to mention the cruel circus shows that used to take place amongst the ancient Romans, which were watched by everybody, from the rich to the poor, from the aristocracy to the poor, common working classes.

Nowadays however, they have been replaced by cinema which has substituted the real life blood with that represented or at least described. Back in the old days of cinema men used to fall dead like dancers do in ballet. Nowadays, death, wounds, even the decapitated head of a horse are represented in the most realistic and violent manner. If you can't give us blood then at least give us something that looks like it!

If I may add an even more personal memory of mine, I'd like to tell you about the education received not so much from my parents but from "children's" reading material and more or less from

the whole environment I was forced to frequent, where you could breathe the enthusiasm for violence in the air.

The hero was the one who used to “beat everyone else up”. My hero was Gordon, the key-character in the weekly comic “*L’avventuroso*” (The Adventurous). He was actually forced to defend himself from many enemies (“Many enemies, much honour”, as Mussolini used to be so proud of saying). And even though he overcame dangers that had us holding our breath all week, he still managed to wipe them all out, killing them without any half measures.

The drawer of Gordon’s comics was really good at expressing those bloody facts in such realistic detail, exerting such a bad, malign influence on millions of young souls all over America (where the character had been created), Italy, and heaven knows how many other countries.

The concept that the strongest or those who do justice by themselves using horrific violence are always right, has already been confirmed, as mentioned earlier on, by cinema (the other huge school frequented by the very young).

Furthermore, the same concept was made by governments that used to draw support from mass parties, from the masses indoctrinated accorded to those same principles.

I don’t even want to summarize the history of Fascism here, yet alone Nazism and the so called “Authoritarian Europe” as a well known historian of that time used to call it. I will limit myself to briefly saying that, having had some first hand experience of it as a child and boy till the age of nineteen, every time I remember those days it seems like a delirious page out of some book on human madness.

Will we ever manage to come to our senses once and for all? A question mark is required also as far as the great black book of the history of violence is concerned.

By going back to our initial discourse, if the evolution of humanity and civilization no longer make violence “necessary”, then violence itself should be considered as waste that needs to be eliminated, a tumour that has to be extirpated, a swamp that needs to be drained, a stormy sea that has to be calmed. Philosophers, priests, educators, scholars aren’t enough to provide further relief, with the hope of healing this great sick subject that is mankind. We would have to invent unheard of medicines, therapies and new cures and treatments. Let’s just hope that the good Lord inspires us and brings us good luck.