

'THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO'

While in Europe in May of this year, I was shocked, like millions of others, by the news of the wanton defacement of Michelangelo's magnificent *Pieta* by a madman. Shortly afterward, the following editorial appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* (published with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*) in reaction to this act of senseless vandalism.

4 What triggered in the mind of Laszlo Toth those mad moments in St. Peter's Basilica may never be known. But a work that has been revered by many generations of men for its artistry as well as its moving subject, one that has lived beyond millions of human lives, while war and revolutions swirled around it, has been perhaps irreparably, certainly pointlessly, damaged by one man.

It is almost too easy to draw morals from this assault upon the *Pieta*, upon the young Michelangelo's concept of Christ in Mary's arms. There is turmoil in the world, and other works of art, clothed in the implication of man's finest aspirations, are being packed away in Hue before the shells fall. Men, women, and children have been killed in Ireland, because, among other differences, there is disagreement over just how the central figures in the *Pieta* shall be honored on earth. Others have died in the Middle East for, among more mundane reasons, conflicts between a theology that rejects Christ and one that makes him a precursor of Mohammed. And religion, or the denial of it, has entered into the many deaths of Bangladesh and those of Indochina.

If the damage to Michelangelo's masterpiece had been a true parable, it might have come more fittingly while the Thirty Years' War ate out the heart of Europe, while Napoleon was marching, or while millions tore at one another across the world in those two terrible wars of this

century. For those were truly the days Christ prophesied, "in which they shall say, blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bear."

The world is still caught in that perennial dilemma revealed in the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate. When Christ said that He had come into the world to bear witness to the truth, the proconsul answered: "What is truth?" and gave Him in whom he could find no fault at all to be crucified. The innocent still die, and suffer, because one man's truth is another's lie. There are Pontius Pilates in office who condone or promote such deaths, and mobs to call out for them.

But it is better to cling to the hope that rests in the symbols of a better world than to smash them with hammers or bombs. It is better to believe in a truth, and live one's belief, than to fight and die against someone else's truth. And if this is not the final answer — since the other person's belief may be less tolerant — his resort to force may leave no alternative to counterforce. Still, the exploration of the means of intercommunication among many truths alone may save humanity. For man now can destroy himself utterly, as he is already destroying the environment which gives him life. And while forgiveness may be granted by some power beyond mankind for what is done in ignorance, can man forgive himself and his fellow man "for they know not what they do"?

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