

Double standards

I have been the director of Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II (House of John Paul II), our diocesan orphanage in Peru, for almost 11 years. Although I may not be an expert in the field of “orphan care,” I can certainly talk on the matter from personal experience both as a director and previously as a volunteer.

It has been my experience that people, generally speaking, feel a lot of sympathy for the poor and especially for orphans. This is a good thing. It means that people still care for others. I have never had to explain to anybody the need for our orphanage. We all know that there are many kids in the world that are in need for someone to help them. The problems begin, however, when it comes to *how* we should be taking care of orphaned and abandoned children.

Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II is a “family based” orphanage. Unlike many other orphanages that practice a warehouse-style care, we try to recreate a family envi-

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ronment for our children. Family is what they lost and family is what they need, more than anything else. Financially speaking, it means more employees (family teachers) per child than in any other orphanage in Peru.

To my frustration, many people consider it a waste of money, “not a good business model” as one businessman from Germany told me not long ago. “Father, don’t you think that you could help more kids by having fewer employees?” he asked.

My response is that we are not raising chickens, we are raising children, human beings with souls who, in order to be responsible and successful citizens, need contact and direction

and the experience of a healthy family. I don’t consider two people, ideally a married couple, taking care of eight, often troubled orphans, plus two or three of their own children, an unreasonably excessive work force. However, the true heart of the matter here is what is commonly known as “double standards.”

A few years ago I was invited to a nearby orphanage to celebrate Mass on the occasion of its anniversary. After Mass the owner of the establishment asked me if I would like to be part of a jury to walk around and assess the children’s dormitories to vote on which one was the cleanest. There were few other members of the jury, mostly benefactors.

As we walked from one gloomy dormitory to the next, one of the ladies seemed to be very pleased with what she saw. Even when there were no beds but simply mattresses on the floor, she would exclaim: “How beautiful!” “How nice.” She

really thought that those orphans were very lucky to live there. At one point she turned to me seeking some kind of approval of her excitement.

Since I didn’t really share her opinion and didn’t know what to say, I asked: “I guess you wouldn’t mind if your own kids were growing up here, would you?” Judging by the expression on her face she was trying to figure out the true meaning of my question. After a long pause she finally said: “Father, my children are not orphans.”

Double standards. For our own children we always want the best, but for the orphans anything is good enough. For the last 11 years I have been criticized for the most usual things: new tables for the kids were “too nice,” installing toilet seats in the children’s bathrooms was “too luxurious,” planting grass and trees around the house was considered wasteful spending by some, etc. I have always found it difficult and even frustrating having to

explain to people the reason for the way that we take care of our kids at Casa Hogar. The very same things that any good parents would do for their children are often considered superfluous or luxurious when done for the poor orphans.

There are many orphanages in the world trying to take care of millions of orphans. I believe many have good intentions and try to do the best they can, and I understand first hand the difficulty of raising the necessary funds for their care. While the temptation is there to accept the common mentality that anything is “good enough” when it comes to orphan care, and the orphans should feel lucky and be grateful just for not having to live on the street, we strive to give our children the kind of care that any good parent would.

There is a huge difference between not being able to always give your children the best, and lowering your standards just because they are orphans and therefore don’t deserve the best.

Christians in the Middle East

Dr. Habib Malik of the Lebanese American University has been a friend for many years. Few men have such an informed and humane view of the sad, even desperate, position of Christians in the Middle East. As a Lebanese Maronite with a Harvard doctorate in intellectual history, what Dr. Malik knows comes from experience as well as impeccable scholarship.

The Hoover Institution Press at Stanford University recently published a short booklet by Dr. Malik that should be required reading for anyone concerned with the fate of ancient Christian communities throughout the Levant, including the Holy Land. “Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East” can be read in one sitting. Its brevity is an advantage: a concise mind and an accomplished pen distilling a vast amount of knowledge and experience into 68 pages. Let me try, with far greater brevity, to highlight several of the book’s key points.

1) Middle East Christians today have had two distinct historical experiences. One is an experience of freedom. The other is an experience of being a dhimmi, a second-class citizen existing on the sufferance of the Muslim majority in an Islamic state.

2) Ninety percent of Christian Arabs live in conditions of dhimmitude today, including

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the Copts in Egypt, the Chaldeans and Assyrians in Iraq, and the Greek Orthodox and Melkites in Syria, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. These are the Christians at greatest risk from Islamism and jihadism.

3) Christians who have been subjugated for generations have, over time, “lost all sense of what it meant to experience a life of true liberty.” Thus they have developed a variety of survival strategies which, having been thoroughly internalized, now seem natural: kowtowing to authority; accepting benefactions from dictators like Saddam Hussein in Iraq or the Assad dynasty in Syria; remaining silent in the face of atrocities committed against Christians by Islamists and other Muslims; blaming the current problems of Christians in the Middle East on that great bugbear, the State of Israel.

4) Christian communities in the Middle East are also under tremendous pressure because their numbers are shrinking while Muslim populations are growing. Emigration (to escape

persecution or to seek prosperity) has played a considerable role here; so has contraception.

5) Both free Christian communities and dhimmi Christian communities suffer from a paucity of indigenous leadership. (Dr. Malik doesn’t say it, but I expect he means both political leadership and religious leadership.) This has created another comparative disadvantage for Christian communities in the Middle East. For their Muslim neighbors, having rejected various secular ideologies, have increasingly turned to more stringent (and thus more intolerant) forms of Islam in recent decades – and have done so at a time when few Christian leaders, clerical or lay, have been defending Christians’ rights, much less proposing Christianity as an attractive alternative to secular ideologies.

6) Western indifference to the fate of Arab and other Middle Eastern Christians has also contributed to their decline and their present peril. This blindness has also imperiled the West. Vibrant Christian communities can be a check on Islamism and jihadism by promoting Islamic moderation and openness. In Malik’s own words:

“Such moderation is sure to be strengthened when Muslims interact daily with confident fellow-native adherents to a creed that does not condone suicide bombers, respects women, is not out for religious domina-

tion, upholds the principle of religious pluralism, is compatible with liberal democracy, defends personal and group rights, emphasizes the centrality of education, and is not uncomfortable with many features of modern secular living. Whenever local Christians have felt relatively unmolested, they have acted as catalysts for positive change and as conduits for some of the West’s finest and most enduring universal values, and this in turn

has advanced Islamic tolerance and moderation.”

The defense of religious freedom for persecuted Christians in the Middle East is a moral obligation. It is also a strategic imperative. Middle East Christians who share a historical experience of freedom, or who can shake off the psychological shackles of dhimmitude, are a strategic asset, not the headache the State Department usually imagines them to be.

