CIVILITY SEEMS TO HAVE TAKEN A BREAK!

March 19, 2002

Published in The Morning Call newspaper (Lehigh Valley, PA)

CENTER VALLEY – This week and next, university students are taking part in the time-honored tradition of Spring Break. It affords them a time to recoup from the rigors of study or revive from the harsh realities of winter. Sports teams will travel to warmer climates to get in some outdoor practice. Service-oriented students will work at Habitat for Humanity or other volunteer organizations. Most, though, will simply head for the beach, intent on having some fun in the sun.

What’s wrong with this picture? On the surface, nothing really, except perhaps the furthering of an unrealistic notion that after only eight weeks of work, young adults need or deserve a vacation. This hardly happens in the “real world” beyond the college campus, as they will quickly find out after graduation.

But looking at it more closely, we see that Spring Break has degenerated into raucous behavior replete with binge-drinking games and wet t-shirt contests. What was traditionally a “break” in view of learning the value of leisure has become instead a demand for casting aside social strictures for the sake of a good time. Unfettered freedom is now the vogue, with the media and entertainment industry actually sponsoring days of debauchery. How has our educational culture come (or gone) so far?

Diverse educational issues have been in the news recently, from college curricula and high school exams, to district-wide test scores and teacher qualifications. But no one seems to be focusing on the primary task of education, namely, the formation of persons in relation to one another. What is absent from the many discussions is a consideration of social mores – those unenforceable but essential guides to human action that operate in a domain somewhere between the constraint of law and the expression of free choice. Spring Break might put irresponsibility...
on public display, but it is just as evident in the increasing and disturbing lack of manners in society in general.

Homeowners are bombarded with sound pollution from care radios blaring gangster rap. Churchgoers are distracted by screaming toddlers and further annoyed by the “shush”-ing of their otherwise helpless parents. Teachers are dismayed by students’ disinterested demeanor and disturbed by their ill-timed chattering with nearby classmates. Radio listeners are taken aback by racist remarks that easily escape the mouth of local politicians. Readers can, no doubt, multiply the examples, for discourtesy appears in countless forms.

And people are taking notice. Not long ago (1996), John Marks published an article in *U.S. News & World Report* that said how nine out of ten Americans think incivility is a serious problem, and nearly 80 percent think it has worsened since the 1980’s. Some 85 percent of those polled believe that incivility erodes healthy values, like respect for others, while more than 90 percent believe that rudeness contributes to increased violence in our land.

Why should this concern us? Because civility, expressed in mannerly conduct and governed by social etiquette, forms the foundation of public life and, therefore, of our common culture. Discounting discourtesy endangers who we are. As Samuel Adams once remarked: “A general dissolution of principles and manners will more surely overthrow the liberties of America than the whole force of the common enemy.” A more contemporary warning comes from *Washington Post* writer Michael Kelly, who avers that in our “age of no class” we face the “horror ... (of) fast approaching a culture where it is impossible to offend.”

We need to object to offensiveness because it can easily escalate into something worse. Business people know this, when a lack of customer service hurts sales. Office workers know this, when crassness toward them becomes harassment. Coaches know this, when parental involvement becomes all-out assault. If we wish to engage in building a healthy culture, as Don Eberly notes in an edited book by that very title, we must learn “that there is an unbroken link between uncivil and ill-mannered behavior of the milder variety and tolerance for the more barbaric treatment of human beings.”

To break this link we cannot simply lament the lost arts of courtesy. Nor can we relegate this problem to someone else’s private sphere. Rather, each one of us – not just teachers or parents, but everyone – must reconsider our continuing consumption of and support for a culture that values freedom of expression over social responsibility. Then we must act, deliberately and courageously. Perhaps if we begin to correct unmannerly behavior in younger members of society – our own children as well as others’ – then education at every level stands a chance of making a real difference.

*(Rev. Thomas F. Dailey, O.S.F.S. director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture at DeSales University in Center Valley.)*