

Resolving to Make a Difference

by Fr. John S. Rausch

Franklin-Covey, a company specializing in personal effectiveness training, conducted its third annual New Year's Resolutions Survey by polling 15,031 customers. The respondents' top three resolutions for 2008: 1) get out of debt or save money, 2) lose weight, and 3) develop a healthy habit like exercise or healthy eating.

The survey further reported that only 23 percent keep their goals for a year and fully 35 percent break their New Year's resolutions by the end of January. More than a third said they were too busy to change, and another third shrugged off being committed to them.

Some resolutions on their top ten list would directly impact loved ones, like Number 6: Spend more time with family and friends, or Number 9: Break an unhealthy habit (e.g. smoking, alcohol, overeating.) Other resolutions would further a career, like Number 4: Get organized, or Number 10: Change employment.

While personal improvement appeals to everyone, people of faith might pause and ask how these resolutions address the biting problems of the world. Is self-improvement another expression of narcissism, or can self-improvement be intentionally linked to the common good? In short, at the end of 2008 will people be wealthier and look more like fashion models, or will society radiate more human compassion wrapped in a healthier environment with fewer people living in poverty?

Eric Reece, author of Lost Mountain, thinks that 2007 will be remembered as the year Americans finally realized the urgency of the global environmental crisis. Last year, Al Gore and the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change won the Nobel Peace Prize. Also last year, scientists learned that the Arctic ice cap is melting faster than previously thought. Recently, the phrase "ecological footprint" entered our popular lexicon to highlight the amount of nature needed for our unsustainable consumption choices (google "Ecological Footprint Quiz.")

Frequently, resolutions that serve the common good prove compatible with those for personal improvement. A resolution to recycle, for example, will lessen our ecological footprint while encouraging a review of our consumption choices as we sort the bottles and containers. Turning off lights will save money while sparing the destruction of Appalachia through mountaintop removal. Walking when possible will preserve the atmosphere while adding a few steps of exercise.

However, an emphasis on personal improvement tends to overlook the demands of the larger community. Violence continues to grip our society. At Virginia Tech 33 people were killed in April, 2007, and six months before, five Amish girls were murdered in Pennsylvania. The challenge: To build a culture of non-violence and reconciliation.

Since the average American child views approximately 12,000 murders on television by adolescence, what's the alternative to teaching problem-solving by killing, war and capital punishment? For one thing, fasting from violent TV would offer time for analysis through reading, study and contemplation. Ultimately, when more people resolve to get involved and reach out to socially troubled and isolated individuals, our schools and malls will be safer from rampage murders.

Finally, the plight of 37 million Americans in poverty cannot be overcome by one individual's resolution. However, two public policies would help: universal health care,

and a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants as recommended by the U.S. Catholic bishops. Both policy changes will require considerable effort, but for someone wanting better employment, these goals represent meaningful work.

By January's end, most New Year's resolutions fade. For people of faith Lent, which starts in early February, seems an appropriate time to see past the vanity of personal improvement goals and resolve to work for the common good.