

Hijacking fears and values

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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This is Bishop Paul Marshall's August column for secular newspapers, usually different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first (occasionally, the second) Saturday of every month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. More than 100 columns have been published over the past nine years.

When Samuel Johnson observed in 1775 that “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel,” he was disapproving of scoundrels, not patriotism.

What scoundrels did, and do, is hijack people's values in order to amass power and wealth for themselves. It is not just patriotism that is used this way, but anything that evokes people's fear of losing what is sacred to them. Family and moral values are recent examples of values being hijacked for ignoble purposes.

When the two can't be told apart, religion is as bad as politics. No religion on earth fails to have blood on its hands – the arguments tend to boil down to whose religion has more.

No fictional example of the moral profiteer is more memorable than Professor Harold Hill of *The Music Man*, who sells musical instruments

and band uniforms by harnessing people's fear that their youth may be corrupted by the presence of a pool table.

No real-life example is more horrific than what happened in Europe when an evil man convinced Germans that they were victims of a conspiracy in the 1930s.

What will history say of our own time?

Eric Fromm, who gave much of his career to helping people live and love authentically, observed: "There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as moral indignation, which permits envy or hate to be acted out under the guise of virtue."

History provides an example. The Crusades, no matter what the motivation of their initiators, became the opportunity for breath-taking pillage and murder.

Can anyone say that the love of God motivated those crimes? Of course not, but those who perpetrated them said so. Some of them apparently believed it.

Fromm and Johnson suggest a test for weighing our responses to what we see and hear. If someone consistently raises our fears and repeatedly harks on what is wrong in an effort to get our votes or our

money, we may be in the presence of a scoundrel.

If someone reduces patriotism or morality to one issue or a very small cluster of issues, a scoundrel may be at work.

If we notice that our outrage can be linked to our own sense of personal security or to our pocketbooks, we may be listening to a scoundrel.

That's the easy part – if the alarms just described go off, don't vote for the scoundrels and don't give them money. The more challenging part is regulation of whatever, inside our own souls, makes us vulnerable to the scoundrel's pitch.

Fromm says that the envy and hate on which the scoundrel relies are already there. The scoundrel merely provides the channel through which they can flow.

It is worth asking ourselves, when we hear a stirring denunciation of someone else, what in us makes us interested in hearing such things?

An answer comes in part from the fact that we tend to blame in others what we fear in ourselves. This may explain why so many high-profile crusaders turn out to have secretly sordid lives.

Those who are willing to look into the chaos of their own souls tend to

give others a break. People who know their lives to be in order are seldom obsessed with apparent disorder in the lives of others.

The highest use of religion is not to create the illusion of order and a place from which to obsess about the failings of those around us. The highest use of religion is to make us enough at peace with our own dark places that there is no joy in degrading others. Such a state of things would put a lot of scoundrels out of work, but it would be pleasant.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]