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**News reports raise questions  
about Cassie Bernall's 'yes'**

By Bob Allen

LITTLETON, Colo. (ABP) -- Cassie Bernall's famous "yes" during the April 20 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., may not have happened, according to a couple of recent news reports.

"Everything you know about the Littleton killings is wrong," according to a Sept. 23 article in the on-line magazine Salon. The article claims Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were never part of the Trench Coat Mafia and didn't target athletes, minorities or Christians.

The Rocky Mountain News reported Sept. 24 that investigators told Bernall's parents weeks after she died there were discrepancies about whether she said "yes" after Klebold asked her if she believed in God.

The first account of that conversation reportedly came from Craig Scott, whose sister, Rachel, also died in the attack. He was among 50 students in the library and told investigators he heard the "yes" comment and recognized Bernall's voice. He did not see the individuals involved, according to an investigator quoted by the Denver newspaper.

Asked to point out where the gunmen were at the time, investigators said Scott indicated a table where another student, Valeen Schnurr was hiding. Schnurr, who was shot numerous times but survived, reportedly was lying in the library praying out loud when a gunman asked if she believed in God. She responded, "Yes, I believe in God" and was spared. According to Salon, Schnurr's story was apparently misattributed to Bernall.

Other witnesses differed over their recollections of Bernall's testimonial, the Rocky Mountain News reported. "She said it, plain and simple," insisted Joshua Lapp, one of the first students to report the exchange.

Emily Wyant, 16, however, said she was crouched beneath a table less than two feet from Bernall and never heard Klebold ask Cassie if she believed in God.

Wyant said Bernall was praying out loud after the gunmen stormed the library. She said she wonders whether Klebold heard Cassie praying and singled her out. Wyant said she doesn't know why he didn't also shoot her but suspects he was distracted.

Whichever girl was asked about her faith, her life probably did not hinge on the answer, according to the Salon article. One investigator said there is no evidence the outcome would have been different if she had denied she believed in God.

In a new book, "She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall," Bernall's mother implies she believes the story.

"According to the dictionary, the Greek martyria means 'witness' and refers to someone who refuses, in the face of terror and torture, to deny his or her faith," Misty Bernall wrote. "By that definition it's not at all inaccurate to call Cassie a martyr." However, she called her daughter's martyrdom "unlikely," because "before she was a martyr, she was a teen."

Misty Bernall said what Cassie said to her killers is less important than what it was that enabled her to face death courageously. The book also describes the parents' struggle with Cassie through a period of teenage rebellion before she made a life-changing commitment to Christ two years ago.

A friend of Cassie's added the teenager probably would "be flipping out" over all the attention to her death, which has energized youth groups and spun off an industry of T-shirts, Web sites, buttons and pins. "She's probably up there in heaven rolling her eyes at it all and going oh-my-gosh, because she'd want to tell everyone who admires her that she really wasn't so different from anybody else," wrote the close friend from church.

A Southern Baptist Convention leader who is acquainted with the Bernalls said he believes the killers targeted Christians. Bob Reccord, president of the SBC North American Mission Board told the SBC Executive Committee Sept. 20 the more he has talked to people close to the tragedy the more he is convinced victims were singled out because of their faith.

The Salon article, however, based on interviews with Jefferson County Sheriff's Department investigators working on a report due out in November, described Harris and Klebold as "equal-opportunity" haters who planned to wipe out most of their school. They said the mystery is not why they murdered 13 victims before ending their own lives but why they didn't kill more.

The initial plan was for two propane bombs they had placed in the cafeteria to go off. "That's as indiscriminate as you can get," said one investigator quoted in the article. "Every kid killed was a target of opportunity."

Initial reports that the killers began their spree with the demand, "All jocks stand up," were false, the article contended. Investigators doubted from the start that athletes were targeted, because the attackers stormed the library and not the gym.

Likewise, Isaiah Shoels died because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time and not because he was black, the article said. Witnesses differed over whether Harris and Klebold used a racial slur before they gunned him down.

While the killers probably hurled epithets and talked about God, it was to taunt victims and not a motive for murder, investigators said.

Harris' infamous diary, which Salon said is not really a diary but a journal he wrote in occasionally, opens with the telling phrase, "I hate the [expletive] world." Other entries rail against minorities and praise Hitler's "final solution" but also single out racists and wealthy whites for hatred and even extend to martial-arts experts, people who drive slow in the fast lane and the WB television network.

"The truth may be scarier than the myths," the Salon article observed. Schools can work to combat racism, anti-Christian prejudice or schoolyard cruelty, the article noted, but it is much harder to fight indiscriminate hate.

The article also maintained that Harris and Klebold never belonged to the clique known as the Trench Coat Mafia but were friends of fringe members. Most of the actual group had graduated or dropped out of

school by April, the article said. The killers wore trench coats not to identify with the group, the article said, but to conceal weapons as they walked toward the school.

It also challenged reports that the two were Goths or fans of Marilyn Manson, saying the killers "had nothing but contempt for the music." It also dismissed reports they were gay or that their parents were to blame. While the parents may have been naive, investigators said, Harris and Klebold put up a front to fool them.

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## **Book about Cassie Bernall describes 'unlikely' martyrdom**

By Bob Allen

LITTLETON, Colo. (ABP) -- Whether or not Cassie Bernall ought to be labeled a martyr, she wasn't always a saint, according to a new book written by her mother.

"According to the dictionary, the Greek martyria means 'witness' and refers to someone who refuses, in the face of terror and torture, to deny his or her faith," Misty Bernall writes in "She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall."

"By that definition it's not at all inaccurate to call Cassie a martyr," she continues. While not belittling her daughter's bravery, however, Misty Bernall calls her martyrdom "unlikely," because "before she was a martyr, she was a teen."

Bernall acknowledges that conflicting stories make it hard to know precisely what happened in the pandemonium during the April 20 massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. By one popular account, one of the killers approached the 17-year-old Cassie in the school library and asked her if she believed in God. She paused, then said "yes," and gunman Dylan Klebold put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger.

While many have hailed her daughter as a martyr, Misty Bernall's book says Cassie probably would not want to be remembered that way. She says what Cassie said to her killers is less important than what it was that enabled her to face death courageously.

Much of the book describes Brad and Misty Bernall's struggles with Cassie through a period of teenage rebellion before she made a life-changing commitment to Christ two years ago.

The Bernalls confronted Cassie three years ago after accidentally discovering letters from a friend in which both fantasized about murdering their parents. After consulting police and their minister, they responded with tough love, cutting Cassie off from her friends, pulling her out of public school and enrolling her in a private Christian school.

It was a dark period, in which Cassie constantly looked for opportunities to sneak out and threatened to run away and commit suicide.

That all changed abruptly, however, after a new friend at Cassie's new school invited her to a youth retreat. While the Bernalls had reservations about the sponsoring church's hellfire-and-brimstone reputation and weren't sure they could trust their daughter, they allowed her to go.

While there, Cassie responded to an altar call to pray for forgiveness. When she returned home, she didn't say she'd been saved or act emotional. "Mom, I've changed," she said matter-of-factly. "And it really seemed to be true," Misty Bernall writes.

"From then on, Cassie became a totally different person. She never talked much about that weekend, and we never pressed her. But her eyes were bright, she smiled again like she hadn't for years, and she began to treat us (and her brother) with genuine respect and affection."

Only after Cassie's death did her parents discover the depth of her faith through letters to friends and other writings she left behind. She marked favorite passages in books including "Bread for the Journey" by Henri Nouwen and Heinrich Arnold's "Discipleship: Living for Christ in the Daily Grind."

She described living with doubts, trying to be a witness and wondered if God might someday call her to be a missionary.

Ironically, it was Cassie's dramatic turnaround that caused her parents to allow her to transfer to Columbine High following her freshman year.

"To make Cassie into a saint would be all too easy, especially now that she isn't here to make any more mistakes," Misty Bernall writes. "People talk about her smile, her ability to listen, her selflessness, and her caring character. All of those qualities were there. But it is important to add that the daughter I knew was equally capable of being selfish and stubborn, and that sometimes she behaved like a spoiled two-year-old. Sure, she was long over the worst stage of adolescent rebellion, but I was still waiting for that final emergence every mother waits for, when a daughter reaches true adulthood and becomes a companion and friend."

Published by the Plough Publishing House in Farmington, Pa., the 140-page book sold 200,000 copies in its first two weeks. It was 74th on a list of 100 hot books on Amazon.com Sept. 28.

Proceeds from the sale of the book will go to a foundation set up in Cassie's name. Funds will go to youth groups in the Denver area and to establish a scholarship fund.

"We can't undo what happened at Columbine, but I am certain that we can prevent similar tragedies from happening again," Misty Bernall writes in the book. "I am sure there must be a way to reach even the most alienated, hostile teen before it is too late -- before things have gone so far that we feel tempted to throw up our hands and watch our worst fears come true. If I've learned anything from Cassie's short life, it is that no adolescent, however rebellious, is doomed by fate. With warmth, self-sacrifice and honesty -- with the love that ultimately comes from God -- every child can be guided and saved. At least I will never give up that hope."

"To me, Cassie's life says that it is better to die for what you believe than to live a lie."

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**CORRECTION:** In the Sept. 23 ABP story "Executive Committee debates, but declines to study, 'ecumenism'," please correct the reference to Gary Frost's church in the eighth paragraph to Rising Star Baptist Church.

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