

# WHEN EVIL STRIKES

## The Catholic Response to Terrorism

### **The reality of evil and the response of faith**

When tragedy strikes, when horrors such as terrorist acts are inflicted by human beings upon their fellow human beings, our very sense of self is shaken. The rules and rituals that guide us through our daily lives may be temporarily shattered, and we can feel profoundly disoriented, vulnerable, and alone.

This is particularly true when we come face-to-face with evil. It is tempting for modern men and women to deny the reality of evil, or to explain it away in psychological or sociological terms. But evil exists, and when we see it directly, it can cause us to despair. That human beings can commit such terribly evil acts may even rock the foundations of our faith. That is why the true triumph of evil is not simply the evil act itself, but the despair, hopelessness, and fear that these acts can engender in others.

Terrorism is meant to inspire fear, and only faith can drive fear out. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,” the psalmist sings, “for thou art with me.” In faith we turn to One who is greater than evil. We turn to the God who so loved us that His own Son died for us and our salvation. We remember the assurances He gave us that He will always be with us, that death is no longer the end, but a new beginning.

We turn to the Church He instituted on this earth, and we gather with other believers so that our faith may deepen and our courage grow. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus tells us. Having stood face-to-face with evil, we need to immerse ourselves in that which is good. We need to hear the truth that our God is greater than any evil, if only we turn to Him and call upon Him.

### **But where is God when evil strikes?**

Did the victims of terrorist attacks deserve to die? Was this part of God’s plan? Certainly not!

God does not intend evil. God does not wish for human suffering. But God created humans with free will. From the moment when Adam and Eve chose their own desires over the way of God, the effects of original sin have echoed down the generations. Sin is real, and we all are sinners. We all abuse the freedom God gives us. That is why we have need of God’s mercy and forgiveness. Some people, however, have so hardened their hearts – perhaps out of hatred, perhaps out of despair, but always by turning away from God – that they are capable of great acts of terror and destruction.

Where is God? God is present always and everywhere. Not commandeering our free wills, but present with strength, hope, and love. God is with the victims at the moment of tragedy. God is with the survivors. God is with their rescuers. God is with each person who calls on Him.

While acts of great evil such as terrorism can seem overwhelming, as Catholics we know that death is not the end, and that God awaits all those who perish. But God is present also in the aftermath of tragedy – the helping hands of strangers, the Good Samaritans who donate labor or blood or money, even the people who can only pray from afar.

On the Cross Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me!” from the first line of Psalm 22. Take time to read this psalm, which reads like a description of Jesus’ Passion and Death. This psalm ultimately becomes a prayer of great faith that God can be trusted even in the darkest moments. God did not abandon Jesus on the Cross, nor does He abandon us. As Jesus suffered on the Cross, so God suffers with us. He is also present in our own response to tragedy – our courage, our willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others, and our witness to Jesus’ call to love everyone, even our enemies.

### **The righteousness of anger, the danger and futility of revenge**

After an act of terrorism or other great evil, we may feel great anger, and some of us will cry out for revenge. But as Catholics, we know that while we cannot deny our emotions, neither can we surrender to hatred.

In the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Pope John Paul II’s prayer is one that we can all make our own: “May (the Virgin Mary) help all not to give in to the temptation of hate and violence, but to commit themselves to the service of justice and peace.”

“It is natural for our shock to give way to anger,” said Bishop Walter Sullivan of Richmond, Va. “We must be careful that it does not give way to vengeance.”

Anger is a totally appropriate response to tragedy. Anger can indeed be holy. It can motivate us to work for justice, to right wrongs, and to provide for victims. Anger fuels us to protect life and respond to threats. But anger, no matter how righteous, can easily take a devilish turn when it gets channeled into vengeance and mindless retaliation.

Certainly it is appropriate and right to work toward bringing evildoers to justice. Those responsible for acts of terror or cruelty must be held accountable. Likewise, it is appropriate to protect ourselves from greater harm to come.

But great care needs to be taken that defense of our own citizens’ safety and efforts to bring the guilty to justice do not occur at the expense of innocent lives. Such action is immoral in itself and also leads to greater and greater retaliation, condemning

ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren to an endless downward spiral of violence and hate.

Specifically, it is wrong to assign guilt by association. We must not hold innocent people responsible just because they happen to share the same religion or national or ethnic origin of the perpetrators.

It is also wrong to launch military action that would target civilians and others innocent of the crime. Catholic teaching says military action is justifiable once responsibility for the act is determined with moral certitude, though the use of force must be applied with certain restrictions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that “the use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition” (2309).

Ultimately, the challenge is to take our anger and our resolve and turn it towards building the Kingdom of God, where all are protected and all can live in peace.

### **Talking with your family**

Parents have a special responsibility to help their children respond to tragedies in a healthy way. Children will mirror the feelings of their parents, so be sure to take good care of your own emotions as you care for theirs. Your faith will comfort them, just as your fears will make them insecure.

The key is to reassure children that their feelings are normal, and that they are not alone. There are adults who care for them and are working to keep them safe. There is a God who loves them and will never abandon them.

You can help children by asking them to recount the incident. From that you can learn what might be at the heart of their fears. Have younger children play a game with you, or draw pictures. This will give you clues to their emotional state. Don't criticize the child's feelings, but welcome them. Also don't dismiss their fears as baseless, but offer information that can help reassure them.

Stick to familiar routines, which children will also find reassuring. Bedtime is often when fears emerge. Clear away time to spend with your children in the evening. Pray with your children. Pray for the victims. Ask for courage and strength. Praise God for all the goodness found even in the midst of tragedy. Pray the Rosary or the Memorare as a family. Pray the Guardian Angel Prayer with younger children. Pray before the Crucifix, or a picture of the Holy Family. Use the symbols of our faith to remind children of God's presence and love for them.

In times of trauma, children can feel as isolated and alone as we might. Bringing them to church to worship with a community of believers reassures them that they are not alone, and teaches them that it is to God that we all turn in such terrible times.

We also believe that God is working in history, within our own lives, and that we can be instruments of peace. If they are old enough, let your children join you in contributing time, talent, and treasure to those agencies aiding the victims and their families. In all these ways families can respond to God's call and help to create a world of greater justice and peace.

## **Prayers**

In addition to the prayers below, you might find solace in saying the Rosary together as a family or with friends, or reading the psalms aloud. Psalms 5, 71, 85, and 140 are especially appropriate.

### **Prayer to a Guardian Angel**

O Angel of God, my guardian dear,  
To whom God's love commits me here.  
Ever this day be at my side,  
to watch and guard, to rule and guide. Amen.

### **Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel**

St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our safeguard against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray. And do you, O prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

### **Memorare (Prayer to Our Lady)**

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession, was left unaided. Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto you, O Virgin of virgins, my Mother. To you do I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful. O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions, but in your mercy, hear and answer me. Amen.

### **A Blessing for Your Family**

Lord, bless our family, all of us now together, those far away, all who are gone back to you. May we know joy. May we bear our sorrows in patience. Let love guide our understanding of each other. Let us be grateful to each other. We have all made each other what we are. O Family of Jesus, watch over our family. Amen.

### **Prayer for Mourners**

Lord God,  
You are attentive to the voice of our pleading.  
Let us find in your Son  
Comfort in our sadness,  
Certainty in our doubt,  
and courage to live through this hour.  
Make our faith strong  
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Prayer Attributed to St. Augustine**

Watch, dear Lord, with those who wake or watch or weep tonight, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend your sick ones, O Lord Jesus Christ, rest your weary ones, bless your dying ones, soothe your suffering ones, shield your joyous ones, and all for your love's sake. Amen.

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## **Our Sunday Visitor**

200 Noll Plaza • Huntington, IN 46750  
1-800-348-2440 • [www.osv.com](http://www.osv.com)  
ISBN: 1-931709-17-3 • Inventory Number: P3  
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