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Missouri Bishops' Reflection A Catholic's Response To Terrorists' Attacks

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The terrorist attacks of September 11 sought to tear apart the human family; they have had the opposite effect. Americans and people throughout the world have responded with countless acts of heroic self-sacrifice, compassion and prayer. There are many examples now indelibly etched in our national memory: the New York firefighters rescuing people from the crumbled ruins of the Twin Towers; the ongoing recovery work; the compassionate response of Americans in donating blood; and the overwhelming support expressed by nations throughout the world. People of many diverse faiths-Christian, Jew, Muslim and others-have come together to pray and express their solidarity.

With all Americans, we were deeply shocked and saddened by the September 11 terrorists' attacks against the United States. As a nation, we have experienced a terrible encounter with evil. It is important as Catholics that we seek to understand this tragedy through the light of our faith in Jesus Christ. Our response, as Catholics, to this terrorist attack against our nation must be formed by the light of the truth of the Gospel.

Many questions arise in our hearts as a result of this national tragedy. It raises the most ancient of theological questions, the problem of human evil. The question is posed:

How could God permit such evil?

Evil is a consequence of the misuse of the gift of human freedom. God bestowed upon humanity the unique ability to be able to choose to do or not to do His will. In giving human beings freedom, God exalted the dignity of the human person and gave humanity an opportunity for nobility that is unique in all creation. God gave us freedom in order that we might choose His will, that we might choose to love.

We can, however, reject God's will and choose evil. God's will was not for human beings to crash airplanes into office buildings for the expressed purpose of destroying thousands of human lives. This was the cold, calculated, sinful choice of human beings. For their acts, the terrorists and their co-conspirators must be brought to justice.

Some ask the further question,

How could such individuals do such deeds of terrible destruction believing that they were actually doing God's will?

All sin, beginning with original sin of our first parents, involves self-deception. The power to rationalize enables human beings to distort in their minds what is clearly evil into what they con-

ceive to be good.

What is God's response to human evil?

God does not revoke human freedom. God's response to human evil is Jesus Christ. Jesus immerses himself in our human condition, even to the point of experiencing human evil in his death on the cross. Jesus' absolute fidelity to the Father's will gains for all humanity mercy, redemption and the victory of life through His resurrection.

What is to be our response to the human suffering created by the terrorists' attack?

For the Christian, we see the pattern of Jesus' dying and rising in all of life. We know that God's desire is to draw forth good from evil and life from death. We confidently commend to the mercy of God all those who were innocently killed. For those who lost loved ones in the events of September 11, themselves also victims, we should do everything possible to surround and support them with love. We again urge all Catholics to support the initiatives of Catholic Charities to assist the victims.

What should be our response as our nation attempts to protect itself from future attacks of terrorists?

Prayer

Our first response must be to pray. It was gratifying that President Bush called the nation to prayer on September 14. We need to be persistent in our prayer for wisdom for our leaders in the decisions that they must make in responding to this attack on our nation. We pray for a just and lasting peace for our world. We pray even for those who are responsible for these crimes against humanity as well as for other potential terrorists that they may have the grace of a change of heart. We know that Jesus died and gave His life on Calvary for them. We pray for ourselves that the Lord gives us the generosity and courage to make whatever personal sacrifices may be required of us in defending the innocent and the establishment of an authentic peace. We pray for innocent civilians, both here and in other countries, that God will protect them and keep them from all harm. We pray for the refugees who are fleeing their homelands to avoid the destructiveness of war. Finally, let us pray that with God's help we can establish a just and lasting peace.

Gratitude and Unity

One grace that we already see resulting from this tragedy is a renewed unity among Americans. This threat to our nation has given all of us a renewed appreciation of our many blessings and revived our spirit. It is important that we each work to preserve this unity in the weeks and months ahead.

Opposition To All Forms of Bigotry

An additional tragedy resulting from the terrorists' actions has been the attacks by a few on Americans who have emigrated from the Middle East or other places. The terrorists will have succeeded if they provoke Americans to acts of hatred against innocent people just because they share nationality, religious belief or physical appearance with those responsible for the September 11 attacks. Catholics must do everything possible to speak out

against all such actions of bigotry. At this time of tension and uncertainty, let us especially extend our friendship to our Christian and Muslim Arab brothers and sisters. We recall the words of the Council Fathers acknowledging our kinship with the followers of Islam who, "professing to hold the one true faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God." (See Lu-men Gentium, paragraph 16.) We encourage interfaith prayers and other events that will deepen our mutual respect and forge stronger bonds of trust and affection.

Prayerful Support for Our Military

We must pray in a very special way for the men and women in our armed services that God will protect them and bring them home safely. They provide a great service to our nation by their willingness to risk their own lives in order to protect our nation. They deserve and need our prayerful support.

Commitment To End Terrorism

We need to support with our prayers President Bush, our national leaders and the leaders of other nations at this most difficult time, that God will guide those in authority as they develop responses to this tragedy. Our nation and the world have a right and an obligation to defend against unjust attacks. The international community has a responsibility to prevent those with such little regard for human life and democratic freedom from gaining personal goals by terrorism and violence.

Love of Enemies

The response of our nation and other nations needs to be measured. Actions should be consistent with the "just war" principles. In our Catholic tradition, any decision by our nation to use military force to respond to these terroristic acts is subject to moral guidelines and strict conditions. (See Par. 2309 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church). Retaliation is not a principle found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus challenges his disciples to love even our enemies. Moreover, we are morally obligated to take every possible precaution not to endanger innocent civilian lives in our efforts to protect our nation and world from the perpetrators of violence. We have the further obligation to provide care for refugees and others suffering from the dislocation of military operations. In this regard, we encourage donations to Catholic Relief Services and similar agencies in their work of offering relief to the victims of wartime devastation.

Opportunity for Honest Reflection on American Culture

There is absolutely no possible justification for the actions of the terrorists and those who assisted them in the callous destruction of human life. However, this terrible human tragedy is an opportunity for soul-searching and reflection on our cultural values. We would do well to ask ourselves what aspects of our international policies and our cultural values could so threaten others as to occasion such hatred and violence. Have we used the gift of our liberty as Americans only to promote what is good and noble or can others justifiably fear contamination of moral values and virtues from American culture? A lasting peace cannot be founded upon military power. Our nation will need to forge new friendships as it seeks to address the social, economic and cultural issues underlying current divisions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Promoting a Culture of Life and Fashioning a Civilization of Love

Finally, we are saddened by the misdirected zeal of the terrorists. It is tragic that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives to accomplish such evil deeds. We would do well to pray that our hearts are open for the Holy Spirit to renew the fire of His love. May we bring an even greater passion to our efforts to embrace God's will in our lives. May the Lord deepen our commitment and willingness to sacrifice in order to create a culture of life and fashion a civilization of love. May the love of Christ conquer all hate and violence. May the peace of Christ reign in our hearts and over all the earth.

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