

There are no Quick Solutions to Evil, but there is a way to Respond

I wanted to take a break this week in my column doing a series that is a walk through the Mass to address two more tragedies that our nation faced last week, namely the mass murder that took place in El Paso Texas and then a separate mass murder that took place in Dayton, Ohio.

In the face of these tragedies and when anytime there is an act of evil that shocks us, inevitably there are various responses that are given. On the good side, there are calls for prayer and unity and the inherent goodness in humanity that we see in people lining up to donate blood or help in any way that they can. But on the other, there are some who will try to paint a quick picture of the situation having no knowledge of the investigation, or offer up solutions at best are uninformed, and at worst are attempts to score political points.

I don't have all of the answers and that is not the point of this column. The point is to simply pause and say what do we do in the face of evil when we look for answers and try to be the face of good? Here are some thoughts as a priest, a Christian, and an American.

1. No human law will get around the effects of original sin. Human beings are capable of such good, and I see this every day. The good in people never ceases to amaze me in what people do for one another. God saw the same thing which is why He sent His Son. Sometimes in the face of tragedies, there are movements to “do something” that are well intended. And sometimes laws and policies do help lower a crime rate, or combat mental illness and bullying. But it is also important to remember that as long as there are people, there will be elements of evil in the world. Some will chose to do horrible things to other people. We can't legislate evil away.

2. When everything is political, let's not get political and finger-point saying a particular politician or party is at fault. Patrick Crusius was identified as the El Paso shooter who took the lives of 20 people. From what we know so far, he hated the rising Hispanic population of Texas; he was described as a “troubled youth” and a loner. A document that he wrote criticized both political parties. Connor Betts was the Ohio gunman; he was a self-described pro-Satan “leftist” who hoped to vote for Elizabeth Warren. (Sources: CBS News, Washington Times). Republicans are not at fault for the shooting. Democrats are not at fault for the shooting. We can all agree that these are evil acts, and rather than finger-point or use tragedies as opportunities for political gain to vilify the other side, these are times to come together. To be sure there are historical links between politics and violence at times such as Nazism, Communism, Fascism, etc. But a person who takes innocent lives is not acting as a Democrat or Republican or whatever party they subscribe to, they are acting in the name of evil.

3. We must avoid generalizations. Related to not pointing political fingers, sometimes there can be generalizations when evil occurs. A small number of priests are abusers. A small number of parents abuse their children. A small number of people commit

violence in the name of religion. Unfortunately, some can generalize and stereotype groups of people. Now it can be the case where we can say more needs to be done from leaders; for instance it was reasonable to say the bishops need to act on abuse, which they have; and it's also reasonable to urge more Muslim leaders to speak out against violence when it occurs or denounce clerics who call for attacks on Jews or Christians; or to point out that people are persecuted by religious leaders for their orientation or religion in parts of the world. On the one hand we do not want to be so "politically correct" we do not address bigger concerns with religions and groups, but we also can't generalize and stereotype, being mindful that evil crosses religion.

4. We must look for warning signs and be proactive. In some cases before an act of violence occurs, we later learn there are "warning signs" such as hate filled manuscripts, or outbursts of violence, or bizarre behavior by an individual. No one can predict an act of violence, but sometimes a person won't ask for help. If we notice a change in a person's behavior, or we sense an anger problem or problem with hatred or racism, if we ever suspect abuse, we can't just close the blinds or ignore the subject. Whenever there is a concern, always report it if warranted; call for a welfare check; get people involved to do an intervention or do what needs to be done to encourage someone to get counseling. It is always best to be proactive.

5. Always believe in the good, not the evil. Two men last week committed acts of evil. But thousands of people committed acts of good; the first responders; the people helping one another during the shootings; the people lining up to donate blood. It can be easy to give up on humanity but that's not what God does. We must look to the good.

6. Pray for all involved, including the gunmen and their families. I can't imagine how Jesus was able to say from the Cross "forgive them, for they know not what they do." In the face of all that hate, He forgave those who were killing Him. Understandably there must be justice. And I understand why some want to see both of these men executed. But our Church is against the use of capital punishment because these people are still human beings. There is hope that one day they could see their evil and ask for forgiveness. They have families as well and loved ones who are devastated by what they did. My hope is that as we pray for all involved, that we don't let a desire for justice turn into a desire for revenge, because that is not what our faith teaches.

7. Mental Health is a real problem. I have no idea whether the shooters would be defined as "mentally ill" or not. But just as there are warning signs when a person is hurting, that includes mental health. There is not as much stigma in asking for help today, but still so many can't do it. It's hard to talk about a bully at school, or to talk about mental struggles when we are seemingly healthy on the outside. If we are hurting or we know someone who is, we must remember and encourage one another that asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.

8. Respecting one another rather than finger-pointing. When we look for ways to combat violence and mental health, while there is no magic cure to get rid of it, there are ways we can reduce it. But this requires actual dialogue and prudent examination of

data, and listening to one another rather than shouting at one another. When we listen and try to look for common ground, we can find a way forward.

A good friend of mine who is a priest recently returned from a few weeks in Lourdes, France, where he served as a confessor hearing confessions six days a week. He mentioned to me how powerful so many of them were and that some were pretty intense. People come to Lourdes hurting and often have such anguish or remorse for past ways of life, but they come seeking healing as well, mindful that God's love can help them change. The love of God is far more powerful than any evil action - may that love flow through us as we work with one another to build each other up rather than tear down, and be agents of love and mercy in the world as our answer to evil.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul