

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 17, 2012 at 7:19am

The Killings in Newtown

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Distinctly Catholic

In the first pages of Scripture, we learn about man's capacity for evil. We learn about retribution and judgment. We learn about our persistent fallen nature and the way sin spreads from generation to generation. Most of all, however, we learn that there is something mysterious about sin. Not mysterious in the sense that the forensic technicians who have been sorting through the human wreckage at Sandy Hook Elementary School should stop their work. They will trace the trajectories of the bullets, identify the dead, analyze the entire scenario. Several thousand years ago, they could have done the same in the field where Cain slew his brother Abel. No, sin and evil are mysterious in the sense that we can explain the events that occurred but never the why. We may find out that America's newest mass murderer, Adam Lanza, suffered from some form of psychosis ? who can doubt that? We may find a note in which his dark intentions were made clear. But, will we ever reach down to the source of the darkness? No. That is why sin and evil maintain their mysteriousness. Evil, in its essence, is an absence as Augustine taught us, and one cannot taste an absence, nor smell it, nor hear it. An absence can be felt but not the way a branch on a low-hanging tree can be felt when it hits one's face.

Suffering is also a mystery, but it is very different from evil. Suffering is the face of love amidst evil. We cannot explain suffering anymore than we can explain love. Some try to reduce the human capacity to love, and so to suffer, to the workings of neurons in our brains, as if humans were really just proto-computers. That is hogwash, of course, but a shockingly large number of people believe it or act as if they do. As soon as a man thinks he can find a reason for his love, he has turned it into what is not love, a thing to be manipulated and controlled, like a watch or a gizmo. For true love points not only beyond the self, beyond the neurons, it points to the infinite or, as believers it is better to say, to the Infinite.

In her long history, the greatest contribution the Church has made to human civilization has been her insistence on mystery, her willingness to stand in the path of any and all attempts to reduce the human person to a form that can be managed by reason, explained by science, manipulated by tyrants or by popular opinion. The Church insists that there is something transcendent about the human person, something the forensic technicians and the psychologists will not discover, something about humankind that requires us to look beyond the horizon of our cognition if we are to grasp the essence of man, in fact, that we can never fully grasp that essence anymore than we can fully grasp the sand on the seashore. The shore intimates our sense of infinity, with its endless vistas of water, and there, too, we experience our incapacity to hold the sand in our hands, it just keeps seeping through, re-joining the sand beneath our feet, the sand beneath the water, the sand that reaches out beyond the endless waves.

The night of the massacre, the Church brought this contribution to the aid and the comfort of the community of Newtown, Connecticut. People filled the church of St. Rose of Lima for a vigil. Despite the best, and barbaric, efforts of news reporters to ask the people who had just endured this horror to give voice to their emotions, the Church, greater in human wisdom, did not ask anyone to give voice to anything. In such moments, we turn to the Scriptures with their beautiful account of the suffering servant in Isaiah and the plaintive appeals of the psalmist. We kneel before an image of the crucified Lord. Through prayer, we seek to bury ourselves in the cloak of Mary at the foot of the Cross: *Stabat Mater dolorosa, iuxta Crucem lacrimosa, dum pendebat Filius.* The hymns are in the hymnal. The prayers are in the sacramentary. Such a time, such an evil time, such a time that is drowning in evil and sorrow, is no time for spontaneity. It is a time in which only the familiar can bring comfort and in which only by casting our gaze beyond the sensible universe in which we walk most of our days, casting our eyes towards the unseen God, only then can we make sense of the tragedy by admitting we cannot make sense of the tragedy.

Suffering such as this does not call forth a press release. Yet, I got several in my inbox the same day as the shooting, from gun control groups and political advocacy groups and even from a Catholic organization. One press release even had the bad taste to include a pitch for donations at the bottom. More barbarism, uniquely modern barbarism to be sure, but barbarism nonetheless. I share the commitment to stricter gun control laws. And it goes without saying that a society such as ours that is still debating whether or not health care is a right, but thinks the right to bear arms is absolute and should extend to semi-automatic weapons, is a society beset by, to borrow a phrase, a culture of death. But, in the face of a tragedy such as this, the Catholic imagination has more urgent resources to offer than a political solution. I have been complaining of late about the reduction of religion to ethics. Skipping the ethics and reducing religion direct to politics is not an advance. Even a good and noble cause is tarnished when it exploits a tragedy just to get some earned media. I am sure that these press releases came from people who are well intentioned, but the Devil has snares for the well intentioned too.

Our culture does not like to look at suffering. It is part of our scientific worldview that we presume most things that ail the human race can, or soon will, be cured. It is part of our commercial culture to promise *solutions* to everything: Buy this gym membership, and you will look great and feel really good about yourself, or visit this psychic, or psychiatrist, and he will disclose the future, or the past, to you, or buy this pill and your sex life will improve, or call this lawyer and she may not be able to cure the effects of that asbestos poisoning but she will sue the hell out of the company you worked for that put that asbestos into its ceiling tiles. In short, we see suffering as something to be fixed and, if unfixable, ignored. The less grandiose violence that stalks our cities' streets, killing as many kids in a week as were killed in Newtown, this we prefer not to look at. Alas, that everyday suffering in the ghetto more closely resembles the suffering servant of Isaiah: *he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him.* But, we more easily identify with the comely children who were killed all at once and in the kind of town we would like

to live in.

Our culture needs to be able to look at suffering and death and not turn away. I have noted this before in less tragic circumstances. Try and find a sympathy card that even mentions death. How many times have you been to a funeral in the past few years and the program did not say "Mass of Christian Burial" but, instead, "A Celebration of the Life of"? A culture that will not look at suffering is a culture that is losing its capacity for empathy, its capacity for love. This is the snare the Devil has set for the well intentioned gun control advocates. They are unwittingly helping our culture "move on" from the face of suffering, the all-too human face of suffering. But, this is what it means to have a well-formed conscience, not just to avoid bad choices but to cultivate our ability to look suffering in the face, and to show compassion, "suffering with," for those whose burden is not light. It is a uniquely Catholic contribution we can make. I recall as a young boy, the first time I visited a Protestant church and the service began with a procession and there was no corpus on the processional cross. "Where is Jesus?" I asked myself, which was the real question we all had last Friday. We Catholics are not afraid to pray to a crucified God. Indeed, in the face of a tragedy like the one in Newtown, the only God I find credible is a crucified God.

So, if such evil as was visited upon the people of Newtown yesterday does not call forth an effort, a program, at least not while the bodies are still warm, what does it evoke? It calls forth faith, which is why the people most affected had a vigil not a rally. This horrible evil calls forth resignation to the inscrutable will of God. It calls forth the remembrance that when Job's friends tried to explain to him why he suffered, God upbraided them. It calls forth that sense of radical dependence upon the Lord which inspired Rev. Augustus Toplady to write "Rock of Ages" the hymn, not the musical: "Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling." Because, while fighting all efforts to reduce man to something manageable has been the greatest contribution of the Catholic Church to human civilization, that is not the Church's greatest contribution to humankind. No, the Church's most important contribution was on display that first night of the shooting, to be the place where people come to the encounter the Crucified who yet lives. The Church is, at such a moment, the mother the world needs. The Church is, at such a moment, most truly herself, welcoming the lost and unconsolable to the only place where consolation can be found.

I am not a quietest. I do believe that our faith spills into our culture and should inform our politics. But not this weekend. Now is a time for prayer and for silence. The deacon at St. Rose of Lima was correct when he said there are no words. No words and no explanations. Finding out that Mr. Lanza had a personality disorder will not really explain what happened. It certainly will not bring those children back. In the hearts of the people gathered at St. Rose of Lima, there is a great emptiness, the emptiness of death, the emptiness of evil. Nothing can fill that emptiness except the love of Him who tasted death so that He could conquer it. For the families of those who were murdered, Christmas will give way to Good Friday this year.

Many have commented on the terribleness of this coincidence, that these children were killed at Christmas, indeed just before the weekend in which the Church anticipates the Incarnation with the word "Gaudete." Yes, but the killings are terrible, too, in the sense that we used to speak of God's judgment as terrible. There is grace, abundant grace, on display in these wretched moments. Not because "we will get through this" and one day our tears will cease. There is grace in the tears. It is love that cries. Only those who love suffer. Suffering is, at this moment, the only pride that is not sinful. Indeed, the words that have been echoing all weekend in my head, and with which I close, are from the third stanza of a Cecil Spring-Rice poem:

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And there's another country, I've heard of long ago,

Most dear to them that love her, most great to them that know;

We may not count her armies, we may not see her King;

Her fortress is a faithful heart, her pride is suffering;

And soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase,

And her ways are ways of gentleness, and all her paths are peace.

Peace. Peace for those killed. Peace for the broken-hearted. Peace for all our streets and schools and ghettos. Peace even for the troubled soul who murdered the innocents. Peace born of a faithful heart and of suffering. Not for nothing is the babe of Bethlehem called the Prince of Peace. He, too, would endure unimaginable suffering. Can we doubt that He is with the families whose loss is so unbearable today? Can we fail to hope that He has already gathered the victims into His arms? Should we not all hide ourselves in Him?

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