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Evil

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Distinctly Catholic

Evil. Its ugly face showed itself anew yesterday as two bombs exploded on Boylston Street near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. The images were searing, the first blast followed by billowing smoke and a runner falling to the ground, then another burst of smoke down the street, people running frantically, the screaming, the sirens, the confusion, the blood on the street. Then, the news: two people are dead. Then, the worse news: one of the two was an eight year old boy. Then, still worse news: a third person had died and more than a dozen were still in critical condition.

Almost immediately after the blasts, different images appeared on our television screens. It was not the image of evil but of the response to evil. EMTs rushing into the smoke, frantic with the desire to aid and assist the wounded. Policemen bringing order amidst the chaos. Ambulance sirens, as loud as the blasts, but bringing help not harm.

"In the midst of the darkness of this tragedy we turn to the light of Jesus Christ, the light that was evident in the lives of people who immediately turned to help those in need today," said Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley in a statement. "We stand in solidarity with our ecumenical and interfaith colleagues in the commitment to witness the greater power of good in our society and to work together for healing." He saw those second images too and, being a pastor, wished not only to confirm them and hold them up, but to join them. A source in the archdiocese tells me that Cardinal O'Malley is already en route to Boston from the Holy Land where he was on pilgrimage, leaving the site of the first Golgotha to minister among those at the most recent Golgotha.

It is good the cardinal is coming home immediately and that last night the priests of Boston went to the site, visited the hospitals, and consoled the families. The spiritual maladies of fear and anger will live long

after the blood is cleaned off the sidewalk, and the FBI has no remedy for fear, no assignment to quell the anger of those whose lives have been uprooted. The Church can minister to these spiritual maladies, but she cannot stop evil. Last week, in the Scriptures, we heard of Peter's miraculous escape from prison. But, the prison remained. The guards were still there. The locks on the cell doors still worked. Peter triumphed over the evil of the prison, but he did not obliterate the prison. The Church moves through a sinful world, the vale of tears as we sing in the Salve, and the Church most distorts herself when she forgets that, when she proposes to "solve" the problem of evil and suffering rather than grasping that suffering is the face of love in the midst of evil. That is the lesson of the Cross.

Pope Francis has frequently referred to Satan in his talks. I am glad of it and the reason I am glad could be seen in the news accounts. Everyone wanted to know why this attack had happened. Of course, it is an important thing to know. Much was made over the use of the word "terror" and "terrorism" to describe the attack. Certainly, the event inflicted terror on the people of Boston, but so did the shootings in Newtown. My working definition of terrorism may or may not apply to yesterday: Terrorism is the employment of violence against innocent civilians on behalf of a political goal by an illegitimate political actor. Adam Lanza, who killed the children in Newtown, did not have any political goal but his actions were just as evil and the family of the eight year old boy killed yesterday will be just as crushed as the families of Newtown. Is there an answer to the "why" question in Newtown? Was there an answer in lower Manhattan on September 11? Ultimately, is not the answer to the existence of evil the long history of disobedience to God personified by the fallen angel Lucifer?

It is important to distinguish between varieties of evil, to be sure. The avalanche in Washington State killed someone whose family mourns as well, but no one attributes that avalanche to human agency. The FBI was not called. Natural disasters, in which there is no human agency, are instances of what the theologians call "ontic evil" as opposed to "moral evil" in which a human choice is present. But, even this bright line may be getting blurry. If the increased number of violent storms is somehow related to global climate change, are not we all in some sense responsible? Will historians centuries hence recognize in our desire for consumer comforts, and the fossil fuels that generate them, the source of untold tragedies and deaths from a more violent climate? Three people died yesterday. How many more will die from environmental catastrophes?

In the end, there are no answers. Recall that in the Book of Job, Job's friends tried to explain to him why he suffered. In the end, God chastises them. It is not their place to explain the reasons for Job's sufferings anymore than it is Job's place to question God's justice in the face of them. All we can do in the midst of suffering is bow before the majesty of God, and all that majesty implies about the dignity of the creatures made in His image and likeness. For us Christians, the majesty of God is revealed most clearly on the Cross. There, love triumphs over evil and the broken body of the Master becomes the very icon of beauty in the world. There, in the contemplation of that icon, the people of Boston, the families of the bereaved, the millions of frightened television viewers, there in the Cross people will find the answer to evil. It is not a logical explanation, but the person of Jesus. He did not explain evil, nor offer a classification of its many varieties, he did something much greater. Christ triumphed over evil with love and invites us to follow Him. On Boylston Street about 3 p.m. yesterday, the EMTs, the policemen, the bystanders who helped move people to safety, they followed Him.

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