All the networks are leading with the Ebola crisis, but leave it to Fox News? Sean Hannity to open his show last night not only with scary images of health care workers in those suits that look like space outfits but with the kind of music we associate with B-grade horror flicks. Fear is abroad in the land as well as Ebola.

To be sure, Ebola is scary. It is a disease for which there is yet no known cure. There are no immediate signs of infection so someone can carry the disease without knowing it, and we can encounter someone who has the disease and be unaware of its presence. It is not easily transmitted, to be sure, but once it is transmitted, the prognosis is grim. The last two outbreaks ended only when all those who had been infected died. That all amounts to a substantial rationale for fear.

Still, Americans have a greater likelihood of being struck and killed by lightning than they do of contracting the Ebola virus.

The disproportionate focus on the Americans who have contracted the disease is inexplicable. Last night, all the networks carried live coverage from a helicopter camera, watching an ambulance transport a nurse from the airport to a containment ward at the National Institutes of Health. It could have been a car chase. Conversely, the coverage of the spread of the disease in Africa is relatively scant, and not only because news organizations are reluctant to send reporters into an area where they could be exposed to Ebola.

There is a natural human sympathy to react to tragedies differently based on our closeness to the person(s) affected. I grieve differently for the death of my mother than I do for the death of the mother of a neighbor or an acquaintance. Still, a sense of solidarity with our own can all too easily descend into a
jingoistic obsession with our own, and an indifference to the suffering of others. Certainly, for those of us who are Christians, our sympathies must extend beyond those that nature has imparted to us. I may grieve differently for the death of my mother but I cannot be indifferent to the death of any other human person. Solidarity in the face of suffering is the very essence of Christian witness.

The news focus is not the only instance of disproportion that the Ebola crisis has exposed. Although underfunded, largely because of budget cuts championed by the fear stokers in the GOP, America has a reasonably robust public health system. We have an infrastructure of hospitals and clinics and ambulances and first responders and trained doctors and nurses. In the face of a new threat, that infrastructure will need to stretch, adopt new techniques, respond in new and creative ways to new public health dangers. But, it exists. We are not starting from scratch.

Conversely, the poor countries of West Africa have only the most rudimentary public health systems. Even treatable diseases like malaria and polio often go untreated. An article in this morning’s Washington Post talks about the significance of six new ambulances in Liberia to the efforts to confront the disease. Six. In a country of 4 millions.

Here is something that should truly frighten us. Instead of being afraid to sit next to a West African on the bus or a nurse on the plane, we should be afraid of the moral blindness of our culture, of the culture of indifference we inhabit and facilitate. Even if we want to be concerned, it is difficult to know how to act, how to help. We know that the amount of money we spend for a latte at the corner coffee shop could provide someone in Africa with a vaccine against polio, but we need our morning jolt. We know that what we spend on a new car could save a family, maybe even a village, but we need to get to work. We worry about our GDP growth, and there is no denying that bad things happen to many good people if the economy does not generate jobs, but we cannot find the time to get our heads around the glaring income disparities between the lives we lead and those in the global South. We should be afraid, even terrified, of our indifference and, even more, of the ways that indifference is as easy to breath in as air. If only human solidarity was as communicable as a virus.

Fear of indifference, alas, is not what is being peddled at Fox News. Fear, you see, has its political purposes. There are plenty of social science surveys that demonstrate when people are afraid they become more conservative, and there is an election in a couple of weeks. And, the fact that this particular disease started in Africa, and there are calls to ban travel from Africa, only adds an ugly undertone of racism to the equation. On top of that, President Obama is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but he cannot command the dynamics of disease transmission anymore than King Canute could command the waves to recede. Any president looks somewhat ineffectual in the face of a threat like the Ebola crisis and that ineffectualness also has its political purposes.

Nothing good comes from fear. We should all be concerned to protect the young from influences that would cause them harm, but fear turns that concern into censorship. We were right to be concerned about the spread of communism in the 1950s and 1960s, but fear turned that concern into a wrong calculation of both the circumstances in Vietnam and the values at stake in crafting U.S. policy, and we all know the result. At the synod this week, we see that the shockingly quick changes in societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians, and the exploding rates of divorce, have scared many bishops: They are right to be concerned, but they need to recapture their level-headedness, as well as their confidence in the workings of the Holy Spirit, so that their fear does not lead them away from the Gospel’s call to welcome any and all with the embrace of Jesus Christ and His Church. (And, those who are unsatisfied with incremental change should remember that change produces fear in the hearts of many, and a counter-reaction can often be stronger than anticipated! The law of gradualism commends itself even to advocates.)
No fear is so thorough-going as the fear of death. But, what is that fear if not the fear of abysmal loneliness? And the antidote to loneliness is solidarity. The Holy Father’s critique of our culture of indifference is worthy of deep and profound reflection by all Catholics. The Ebola crisis and the media coverage of the crisis demonstrates the clamant need to confront our own indifference and also that of our culture, and to do so persistently, with the rhetorical, intellectual, culture equivalents of those astronaut-like suits the nurses wear and the technologies the NIH deploys and the six ambulances now ferrying patients in Liberia to clinics. Always be prepared to give an account of the hope that is within you in Christ Jesus, we are instructed in the First Letter of Peter. Last night, listening to that horrible, scary music on Fox News, I realized how timely that instruction remains. I am not a doctor, nor a researcher at NIH, so I have nothing to contribute to eradicating the world of Ebola. But, we can all do our part in eradicating the fear that is just as crippling and just as deadly as any disease of the flesh.

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