

# Catholic

## UPDATE

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## RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY WITH HOPE AND LOVE

When a tragic event occurs, we may ask why these things happen. Some in despair might even ask, *Where is God?* Yet it is our Christian hope that propels us forward through the darkness. BY GRETCHEN L. SCHWENKER



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Violent acts are reported from throughout the world with increasing frequency, feeding into the now standard 24/7 news cycle. We absorb these accounts from distant places—and sometimes uncomfortably close to home.

Maybe one incident stands out for you; it could be a school shooting, such as the Columbine school massacre, or an act of terror, perhaps the Boston Marathon bombing or the events of 9/11. We find ourselves virtual witnesses of many acts of violence: people just doing their jobs are executed, gun violence randomly takes a child’s life, refugees flee deadly conflicts, school children are abducted, people are killed in their place of worship, and genocide occurs without mercy.

Too many innocent people die in these disturbing, senseless acts. Others survive but carry with them the trauma of injuries, torture, or loss of home and way of life. They may be left with years of emotional and psychological struggle. They may be deeply grieving because someone they loved was one of those murdered. An understandable reaction is to ask why these things happen at all. Some in despair might even ask, *Where is God?*

Yet, it is in these wrenching moments that we most need God. The psalmist tells us that “the LORD is close to the brokenhearted” (Psalm 34:19). Our hearts may be broken, but God is near. As Catholic Christians, we have faith that God is always with us along our life’s journey, no matter how difficult it may become. As Pope Francis has

written, “Faith is not a light which scatters all our darkness, but a lamp which guides our steps in the night and suffices for the journey” (*Light of Faith*, 57).

Coping with violence is, sadly, part of the journey. So, how can we help to heal the trauma that follows? Remaining persons of hope and love and having the strength to find peace again can be overwhelming. Parents, worried for their children’s psychological wellbeing, face explaining the unexplainable. For support along this ragged path, we look to the Bible and what our Church teaches about how to live with the tragic reality of violence.

### HEALING THROUGH GOD’S WORD

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44). This admonition by Jesus to love those who hate us upended his culture in first-century Palestine and still startles us today. It is a demanding task, one he modeled for us in his salvific sacrifice for all, including his enemies.

Clearly, those cruelly set against us or our families are not people we want to know, let alone love. For Christians, though, it is in loving that we find our authenticity; without it we are “nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:2b). Our faith asks us to love beyond reason. We are to forgive, as Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer (see Luke 11:2–4 and Matthew 6:9–15). We, who have been mercifully forgiven for our transgressions by God the Father, are called to extend that mercy to others. The love asked of us mirrors that of God’s limitless love.



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Christian love includes laying down one’s life for one’s friends (see John 15:13), putting others first. We need to defend the defenseless, standing up for the weak and the oppressed. In the wake of global terrorism, sometimes the only choice is to take measures to protect against the destruction of innocent people. But first, we try finding peaceful solutions and never respond in revenge: “Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them” (Romans 12:14).

In the Beatitudes, Jesus taught: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).



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By our actions of love, we seek to outrun hate. By so doing, we become disciples of the good news, bringing God's healing love to others, especially those who have suffered from the hateful actions of others.

Saint Paul knew a lot about suffering. He spoke of affliction as producing endurance, "and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope" (Romans 5:4). It is this Christian hope that propels us forward through our darkness.

## WISDOM OF CHURCH TEACHINGS

On Holy Thursday 1963, Pope John XXIII issued an encyclical, *Peace on Earth*. Although stressing nuclear disarmament in the context of the Cold War, it remains a document that continues to inspire as we commit to preserving human dignity. It emphasizes our understanding that all human rights and corresponding duties derive from the order in the universe created by God, who is the center of our lives. Peace comes from dutifully observing this order.



John XXIII's letter drew on the words of another pope, Leo XIII, who had written about the essence of true freedom as being found in safeguarding the dignity of each person. This freedom, claimed by the apostles and lived out by those who died as martyrs for the faith, "is stronger than any violence or injustice" (*On the Nature of Human Liberty*, 30).

We are called to uphold the dignity of all persons and thereby be witnesses of God's love in the world. We do this during times of peace but also during times when people suffer at the hands of those who do not uphold the rights of every person. Our faith teaches us that violence should be met by nonviolence; our answer to violence needs to be one that builds up God's kingdom on earth.

We remain dedicated to the common good, taking care of others as needed, no matter how difficult the

## COPING WITH VIOLENCE: HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN



Remember: Your response to trauma after violence strongly influences your children's response.

### \*After the event:

- Tell them what happened.
- Show them that you love them.
- Assure them that what happened was not their fault.
- Tell them it is OK to feel sad and cry.
- Promise them that you will always do your best to take care of them.

### \*As healing continues:

- Try to keep them to their usual daily routine.
- Let them talk, write, draw pictures about the event, expressing how they feel.
- Give them some control again through making small decisions (picking out their clothes, choosing a family meal).
- If trouble sleeping occurs, pay more attention; let them sleep in your room for a short time or allow them to sleep with a light on in theirs.

### Throughout the ordeal:

- Tell them God loves us and never abandons us.
- Say prayers together as a family for those who have been hurt.
- Talk to them about the importance of living in peace.
- Do something to help others (donate food or clothes, be part of a service activity at church, help families of those who have been harmed).

## DIG DEEPER

**Look:** What act of violence or tragic event has most shaken you personally?

**Judge:** Is your faith more challenged or strengthened (or both) by tragic events?

**Act:** How can you, through prayer or action, support someone who has experienced tragedy or violence?

\*FROM "HELPING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS COPE WITH VIOLENCE AND DISASTERS. WHAT PARENTS CAN DO." NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH. NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH PUBLICATION NO. 13-3518. REVISED 2013. USED WITH PERMISSION.



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## STANDING FIRM IN LOVE

Maybe you know of, or even know personally, someone who has shown care to those who have been exposed to violence. It is remarkable when such persons seek to help and perhaps protect, sometimes putting their own lives in jeopardy. For times when everything feels pulled apart, there are those among us who look to be of service and create a better outcome. They live out in real time the concept of *agape*, a selfless love rooted in the Christian message of ceaselessly striving to realize God's kingdom here and now.

None of this is easy. It can be too personal, leaving us consumed by the injustice. Acts of violence directed toward us, our family, or friends, or the taking of innocent lives can cause us to respond with anger. Evil is evil. But as Christians, we are to be better than our instinctive outrage, standing firm in love, forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. We look inward to our hearts. We find courage and solidarity in the paschal mystery, that salvific action of our Lord we remember and celebrate at Mass. Jesus was wrongly arrested, tried, abused, tortured, and killed. Yet we know the end of the story, of his rising from death into life eternal.

Some among us do lead by example. We witness victims who survive—and those who loved victims who did not survive—respond to evil with goodness. Instead of being crushed into vindictiveness, they create foundations in the name of those killed to help others or provide an opportunity for their lives to be better. Some seek to curb violence through legislation, others serve in defense of those harmed, and some live each day in kindness, looking for ways to give of themselves.

It is a choice to act in love, but it is also a calling by our very baptism. Each day, we seek to live that call more authentically. Each day, we pray for interior conversion leading us to become more like Christ. Each day, we look to God to find the grace to maintain and live in peace.

circumstance. Throughout our lives, we seek to become witnesses of truth, justice, and love. We seek to create peace. Such ongoing conversion of the heart includes forgiving those who harm us or harm others we stand with in solidarity: our family, friends, neighbors, and even those we have never met.

Standing with all humankind through all experiences, good and bad, is addressed in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), a document from the Second Vatican Council. In it, the council reflected on how the Church can help answer the deep concerns that people have in the modern world, including trying to understand the meaning of suffering, evil, and mortality.

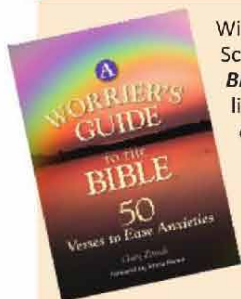
It is always Christ who shows us the way, strengthening us through the Holy Spirit. His “new commandment” of love (John 13:34) holds out the promise that despite the sinfulness that exists in the world, it will be possible for those who trust in God to “establish a universal communion” (GS 38).

Through faith, we can find peace even in grief. The council reasserted our understanding that death is not the end of our story or the stories of those we love. When someone is taken from us, we believe that, in Christ, we can still be united with them and that this loved one has gone home to a new life with God. Accepting this tenet of faith does not mean that we do not experience deep sadness in loss. It does, though, show the way forward out of despair and opens us up to God's healing power and to receiving the gift of God's grace.

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