

"Upon Reflection . . ." A Message from Fr. Gordon

November 9, 2017

Our hearts and minds, our prayers and thoughts are with the faithful of the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, as they prepare to bury their friends, family members, and loved ones killed at Sunday service in a horrendous act of domestic terror. Twenty-six persons, ranging in age from eighteen months to seventy-seven years of age, were murdered in their church sanctuary by a man whom many of them knew, armed with a semi-automatic assault rifle and a hand gun. The killer later took his own life, after being also shot and wounded by a nearby resident who heroically came to the aid of the church.

Although details of the crime are still being revealed, it appears that the shooter had a turbulent history of violence and mental instability, including behavior that prompted a dishonorable discharge following a prison sentence from the U.S. Air Force. Most recently it's been reported that the Air Force had failed to alert federal and state authorities of the killer's previous criminal record, information that could have prevented him from purchasing the weapon he used in the assault.

This atrocious event, coming as it does so soon after the terrorist attacks in New York and Las Vegas, serves further to confirm our fears regarding our communities' and our country's safety and security. The latest attack, however, may feel to us especially close to home, literally at the doors of the church. If we can't feel safe in our pews on a Sunday morning (we may ask), where can or should we feel safe? Our church signs and bulletins proudly announce that all are welcome. Can we honestly say or believe this is true after the slaughter in Texas? As your pastor and friend, I've had some anxious nights and days since hearing the news on Sunday, while contemplating the many and sudden perils of life as we know it now in our society and nation. But how should we proceed? What should be our answer to these dangers?

As with so many things, there's no one answer, no single solution. Still, two approaches (at least) do come to mind and seem pertinent to this latest tragedy. One is the need for comprehensive, sufficiently funded mental health programs nationwide. We clearly need ways (perhaps over and above what we have now?) to identify, seek out, and treat those of our fellow citizens suffering from conditions and disorders that can and too often do lead to the kind of atrocity we saw enacted in a Texas church. I realize this can be a complex process, greatly depending on resources and the willingness of those in need to participate. Still, programs and initiatives promoting greater awareness and offering lasting help in the area of mental health would seem well worth the cost of our state and federal tax dollars. It's a first step.

A second approach -- another attempt at a solution -- is a nationwide discussion, long overdue, beginning in the U.S. Congress, on the proliferation of and easy access to firearms, particularly military-style assault weapons of the kind used by the killers in Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs. I'm well aware of how seemingly intractable (and passionate) an issue this has become. And yet if we look for answers without addressing this admittedly challenging problem we all but guarantee, I believe, that more tragedies like the ones we've witnessed will occur again. We are right to examine the motives behind such attacks -- whether ideological or psychological -- and to take steps to prevent them from happening in the future. But if we do not at the same time look at the means by which these attacks have occurred, we will not have done our job. And we risk allowing other grieving families to join the ones that today our hearts go out to. It is a great moral burden we are under, and yet one with the promise of blessing in it, if we so wish.

Our prayers never go unheard by the God of love. Indeed, as Christians we are called to a life of prayer. But that same God also desires that we act upon our hopes and expectations, that we both seek his will and make it a reality in the current world. In the Letter of James, the author reminds us that we are justified by works and not by faith alone (2:24). So in this present crisis, in this time of our national testing, let us put our faith to work. Let us be free to speak openly, discuss fairly, examine closely, and legislate wisely in order to confront all the reasons for the ills that assail us. And then let us live the prayers we pray, trusting always in God as our one sure and ready guide.

Humbly yours,
Fr. Gordon +