

Remembering September 11th

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As we approach the anniversary of the terrorist attack on America on September 11, 2001 and as Muslim Americans celebrate the month of Ramadan, there is a need for Christians to pause and evaluate what 9/11 means to our national identity. As Catholic Christians who are formally engaged in interreligious dialogue, we hope to offer some of the insights of our experience to our fellow Christians, to our dialogue partners and to all people of good will. We believe that times of national tragedy call out both the best and worst in people. America's greatest successes as a nation have come when we have listened to the best voices and ignored the worst. Events like 9/11 can be confusing because of the number of contradictory voices we hear. In situations such as this, it is important that we return to our best voices, especially as we come to commemorate anniversaries each year. For us as Catholic Christians, our best voices speak to us from the Scriptures and the Magisterium of the Church.

How should we approach the anniversary of 9/11 each year?

What was 9/11? An act of terrorism? Certainly. But what is terrorism? Terrorism is a form of political speech. Fundamentally, it is about ideas of hatred. It is a manipulative voice in a larger discourse. Consequently, the success or failure of terrorism is really measured by the number of people who come to believe its message.

As women and men engaged in interreligious dialogue, we have experience in a different kind of speech. In a certain sense, our kind of speech is what the terrorists fear the most, for it is non-manipulative speech. Dialogue is speech oriented toward reconciliation through mutual understanding and respect. It is also direct speech, unmediated by the press or news editors, and rooted in a first-person encounter that militates against simplistic abstractions and stereotypes.

As a result of our experience, especially in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks, we have come to see one particular fact as needing response. What is the fact? It is that the attacks of 9/11 were made in the name of the God of Abraham. There have been a number of responses to this fact in public discourse, on the Internet, and in the mainstream media. Unfortunately, some of these responses have suggested that the attacks of 9/11 actually define and reveal the essence of what Muslims believe about the God of Abraham.

Our experience of dialogue has shown us otherwise. As a recent Gallup study revealed, while there are some Muslims who do preach hate for the West and support terrorist attacks, the majority, many of whom we know personally, deplore the 9/11 attack on America and denounce terrorism.¹ They see this violence in the name of God as a blasphemy which perverts basic Islamic teaching about justice and compassion. Yet it is also our experience that, reasonable Muslim voices cannot find a hearing in the public square because fear and alienation has created a bias against all Muslims in American society. This bias is reflected in the mainstream media, and prevents reasonable voices from being heard. Indeed, the better voices of reason and truth sometimes appear to be overwhelmed by the voices of ignorance and fear.

Where do we find better voices?

Because there are many different voices raised each year as we approach this anniversary, as Catholic Christians, we must ask ourselves "Where do we find our better voices?" As we seek to listen to the voice of the Church, we turn to the Second Vatican Council and its declaration

Nostra Aetate (“In our time. . .”) which sets forth the Magisterium’s teaching on the relationship between Christians and Muslims. The declaration begins:

In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

The Fathers of the Council go on to reflect on the human community and the origin of our common dignity:

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. (See Acts 17:26) One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, (See Wis. 8:1; Acts 14:17; Rom. 2:6-7; 1 Tim. 2:4) until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light. (See Rev. 21:23f) . . .

The Council Fathers next examine our relationship with Islam and its followers:

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. . . .

The Fathers recognize that the relationship between Muslims and Christians has been a difficult one. While speaking about the hostilities which marked the relations between Christendom and Dar-al-Islam throughout the centuries, the Fathers teach a principle which directly applies to us in the difficult days since 9/11:

Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom. . . .

Such a principle is, of course, meaningless in the abstract and impossible without a deep religious motivation. Our reasons for accepting this teaching lie in the very nature of Christianity and in its most radical and unique claim, that God is love:

We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man’s relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: “He who does not love does not know God” (1 John 4:8). . . .

What Vatican II is really teaching is that we will not be successful as Christians if we do not confront the spiritual issues of 9/11 head on. You cannot love God and hate your neighbor. As a consequence, the Council tells us

No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. . . .

So our first response to individual Muslims, even in the wake of 9/11, can only be to begin with our common human dignity. Anything less is a denial of who we claim to be as followers of Christ. What's more, the belief about human dignity extends to the human community of which Muslims are a part:

The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion. On the contrary, following in the footsteps of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, this sacred synod ardently implores the Christian faithful to "maintain good fellowship among the nations" (1 Peter 2:12), and, if possible, to live for their part in peace with all men,(14) so that they may truly be sons of the Father who is in heaven.

Without doubt, these are high and lofty principles. Without doubt, it is difficult to live this way in a world of contrary voices. Yet, as Catholics, these are our better voices. These are the voices which come from the Word of God and Tradition of the Church. These principles are difficult, for they flow from the most distinctive doctrine in Christianity, a doctrine which sets us apart from other world religions. We believe that God is love. That belief makes significant demands on us. These demands touch our behaviors: our actions and our speech. And they touch our souls: our thoughts and desires.

How are we, as Christians, to apply these principles when it comes to 9/11? As Christians in America, how are we to think about this yearly anniversary?

First of all, it would be good to recall the Catholic understanding of biblical teaching on violence and war. The Catechism tells us:

The fifth commandment forbids the intentional destruction of human life. Because of the evils and injustices that accompany all war, the Church insistently urges everyone to prayer and to action so that the divine Goodness may free us from the ancient bondage of war. All citizens and all governments are obliged to work for the avoidance of war. However, "as long as the danger of war persists and there is no international authority with the necessary competence and power, governments cannot be denied the right of lawful self-defense, once all peace efforts have failed."ⁱⁱ

While acknowledging the right to self-defense, the danger for us as a nation comes in who we conceive as the aggressor. The worst voices would lay that title on all Muslims and on the religion itself. To do so would be to contradict our own doctrine, as noted above in the quotations from *Nostra Aetate*. We must be cautious not to inflate the legitimate call for self-defense into discrimination or harassment of persons or groups because of their religion. This is not a new response. Each of the religions who claim Abraham as their father in faith has, at some point in history, engaged in what could be described as "holy war." Each was able to do this because they saw a mandate from God to eliminate a perceived threat from the other religion. This way of thinking is called scapegoating. The worst part of scapegoating is that it poisons our spiritual lives by causing us to become blind to the dignity of the human person and the wider human community.

"In our time . . ." we have two important examples of another way of responding and remembering. The first was the day of prayer for peace at Assisi, when leaders from many of the world's religions came together to pray, each in their own manner, for peace in the world. The second was the Day of Pardon led by Pope John Paul II as the Church welcomed the Third Millennium. In that solemn act, Catholics recalled the times in the past when we listened to the worst of voices, and ignored our deeply held principles. At the Day of Pardon, Pope John Paul II offered prayers of repentance for the sins of Catholics toward other persons throughout the previous 2000 years. The prayer for other religions is instructive:

V. CONFESSION OF SINS COMMITTED IN ACTIONS AGAINST LOVE, PEACE, THE RIGHTS OF PEOPLES, AND RESPECT FOR CULTURES AND RELIGIONS

A representative of the Roman Curia:

Let us pray that contemplating Jesus,
our Lord and our Peace,
Christians will be able to repent of the words and attitudes
caused by pride, by hatred,
by the desire to dominate others,
by enmity towards members of other religions
and towards the weakest groups in society,
such as immigrants and itinerants.

Silent prayer.

The Holy Father:

Lord of the world, Father of all,
through your Son
you asked us to love our enemies,
to do good to those who hate us
and to pray for those who persecute us.
Yet Christians have often denied the Gospel;
yielding to a mentality of power,
they have violated the rights of ethnic groups and peoples,
and shown contempt for their cultures and religious traditions:
be patient and merciful towards us, and grant us your forgiveness!
We ask this through Christ our Lord.

R. Amen.

The yearly anniversary of September 11th offers us a chance to repeat the act of repentance which the Holy Father pronounced on the Day of Pardon in 2000. This kind of prayer will lead to a purification of memories, so that we might approach the yearly anniversary free from prejudice and scapegoating. This kind of prayer will reinforce the teaching of Scripture and Tradition in our hearts and equip us to be agents of truth, mercy and love in society.

As Catholics, let us be the ones in our nation who recall the better voices. Let us remember those innocent people who were the victims of hatred and aggression. Let us call for justice for those who target the innocent with violence. But let us also call for respect for the many Muslims who deplore violence and love this nation with the souls of patriots. Let us also call for respect for Muslims, who, like Jews and Christians, call Abraham their father in faith. Above all, let us commit ourselves to know individual Muslims personally that, like Jesus, we may call the other "friend."

i John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).

ii *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2307-2308. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, 79:4

