

## Again

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

**-W.B. Yeats-**

*After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands.*

*Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

**-Revelation 7: 9, 14b-**

Accompanying this essay, I am including links to two essays you may remember. The first —*I Prayed Today for the Shooter*—I wrote in June 2016, following the attack by Omar Mateen on the Pulse nightclub in Orlando. Re-reading this essay, I am aware of how much I still believe its thesis, and, at the same time, how distressingly relevant it remains. It would be easy to publish the entire article again, changing just a few words—e.g., “*Latino*” or “*immigrant*” in place of “*LGBTQ*,” and “*El Paso*” instead of “*Orlando*”—and have it speak directly to last week’s attack at the Walmart in El Paso. Though there are, of course, certain differences in the events surrounding Orlando and El Paso, having to do in part with those to whom the shooter’s hate is directed, still both events begin with a man of disordered affections and overarching fear (who may or may not be mentally ill) whose rage at an imagined threat to his identity overflows into public violence. Enflamed by the shooter’s desire to do something “*important*”—something which gives him value, at least in his own mind—and by those public voices who foster hate as a means to increased revenue or power, this rage is combined with access to weapons whose sole purpose is the maximization of death, resulting in the sinful and tragic carnage we saw in Orlando, and see again in those images from El Paso. In both events, as in so many like them, the blinding power of ideology results in innocent blood—like the blood of Abel—crying out to God, as families weep and mourn for those they will not see again.

The second essay, which also seems distressingly appropriate for republication, with only minimal updating required, was written in October 2017, in the aftermath of the Las Vegas shootings. In this essay, I could easily change “*Las Vegas*” to “*Dayton*,” since in both cases, the events, though heinous, seemed less politically motivated than Orlando or El Paso. Yet, in both Dayton and Las Vegas, while the motive may not be clearly political, the driving need of the perpetrator is similar to that of the politicized killings of Orlando and El Paso: i.e., a disordered desire to assert his identity through violence. As with the white

nationalism of the El Paso shooter or the homophobia of Omar Mateen, the shooters in Dayton, or Las Vegas, seem to possess a deep and powerful fear of disappearing—a need to proclaim that “*you will not replace us,*” as the neo-Nazis chanted at Charlottesville—which manifests itself in violence. As at Columbine or Aurora, such shooters seem driven to become notorious, to make a name for themselves either by their “*leadership*” in a political movement (e.g., a race war), or by their individual extremism. Though not inherently a sign of mental illness (which is often used as a convenient scapegoat to keep us from facing other issues), this grand and suicidal assertion of identity reveals a despair that has deepened in our society at least since 9/11—exacerbated, no doubt, by the seemingly endless war. This despair makes many people—especially those who feel their “*rightful*” privilege has been usurped by others—susceptible to extremist ideology or to the abyss of private anger. As victims of the same entrenched racism that makes women and people of color feel marginalized, some white men (and it is mostly white men) become convinced that they should be more successful, and that their hopelessness and failure must be the result of enemies usurping them, stealing what is rightfully theirs.

This fear of erasure and sense of being wronged often manifests itself in acts of dominance over others—as though one might establish one’s identity by standing atop another—and may be found at the root of many disordered behaviors. For example, sometimes, this perceived need for dominance comes out as over-identification with a cause (e.g., the Aryan nation or the anti-federal government movement), in which the individual joins with others who validate his rage at being “*usurped*”. Or it may come out in verbal abuse of others, as in the vitriolic comments on many internet posts, or in vicious chants heard at rallies of political figures who seek to use rage and despair for their own political interests. But it may also take more destructive forms, as in acts of rape and other violence against women, or in “*gay-bashing,*” or racist assaults, or in the harassment of migrants and the abuse of refugees: all of these are signs not of power, but of that fear of weakness and of obliteration. And sometimes, in its most extreme form, this fear of being replaced, this disordered and toxic despair, takes the shape of murder, either against the particular “*enemies*” one imagines (or is led to imagine), or against society at large.

Nevertheless, it is not simply the alienation and fear entailed in these recent outbursts which draw so much attention (for many acts of violence, that are hardly noticed, come from these same motives); rather, it is the means and the effect of these violent assertions of self that make us look at them with shock and sorrow. The proliferation and easy access to weapons such as the semi-automatic AK-47 or the 100-round magazine may not be the *sufficient* cause to explain the evil acts perpetrated in Dayton or El Paso, but they are a *necessary* cause, without which such actions would rarely, if ever, happen. For by their cataclysmic power, these devices not only enable the desperate men whose quest for identity requires a big effect, they encourage them to act. Indeed, the carnage caused in so little time (in Dayton, it was less than a minute) is the primary reason we notice these killers—or in the case of El Paso, notice their cause—which is just what they desire. As such, the weapons become more than just neutral tools, they are the necessary means of identity for the shooter—and their easy procurement is an occasion of sin for our country.

We live today in a nation in the midst of what the book of *Revelation* calls a “*great distress,*” but the robes we wear are not washed in the blood of the Lamb, but in the blood

of our own children and neighbors. So overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of such shootings that only the most heinous even grab our attention, we run the risk of becoming what W.B. Yeats predicted: a place where *“the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned.”* We can no longer afford to speak across each other on talk shows and at political rallies. We can no longer promote the straw arguments of video games or abstract moral decay that allow us to win debating points, while ignoring the truth of our situation. We can no longer speak of *“common-sense gun regulation”*—since far more is required—nor attribute these evil deeds to the mental illness of a *“lone wolf.”* Rather, we must look to the complex causality that is at work, not simply in the perpetrators of these acts, but in the culture itself—in our golden-calf politics and our ratings obsessed media, in the idolatrous understanding of the Second Amendment, that sees the right to own even the deadliest of weapons as inalienable and, in some views, ordained by God. We are in the midst of an epidemic of violence and hatred—an epidemic rooted in an existential despair that leads people into the desolate wastelands of suicide or political radicalism, and is enabled by arms dealers and politicians who willingly feed this darkness for the sake of those old enemies of our human nature: riches, honor, glory.

As Catholic Christians, sustained by a rich history of thought and a spirituality rooted in the Incarnation of Christ Jesus, we must stand with the great multitude and overthrow both the *material* cause of these massacres—e.g., by banning assault weapons and large magazines, by undoing a disordered understanding of the Second Amendment, by striking at the corrupting power of the NRA—and the *underlying* causes—i.e., existential despair, alienation, racism, and a model of masculinity which emphasizes dominance instead of compassion for others. Even as we bury our dead and bind up the wounds of our sisters and brothers, we must become agents of hope and mercy. We must recognize that these acts are engendered by a culture opposed to the life Christ offers, a culture of consumption and power that seeks to dehumanize us in so many ways: by enriching the few at the expense of the many, by dividing us into classes based upon race, by caging children in filth and fear, by denigrating and abusing women and girls, by deifying wealth and power at the expense of basic human needs, by sending young men and women to kill and die for the sake of special interests, by killing those who are most vulnerable because they are inconvenient. We must stand, as Christ stood, against this culture; and filled with the conviction Yeats fears we may lack, proclaim the love and hope of the gospel, again.

Link to ***“I Prayed Today for the Shooter”*** <https://www.dropbox.com/s/y729aing9oadnvf/2016%2006%2019%20I%20Prayed%20for%20the%20Shooter.pages?dl=0>

Link to ***“Do You Want Us To Call Down Fire”*** <https://www.dropbox.com/s/ai09s293m3nhyip/2017%2010%2008%20Do%20You%20Want%20Us%20to%20Call%20Down%20Fire.pa ges?dl=0>