

I Prayed Today for the Shooter

Jesus said to his disciples: "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, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect."

-Matthew 5:43-45, 48-

I prayed today for Omar Mateen. Prayed that somehow, in the mercy of God, he might come to healing of the terrible evil he has done; that he might stand before the living God, in whose arms were embraced the 49 lives he had taken, and understand their loss and the suffering of their loved ones. I prayed that he would weep, surrendering at last to the pain he sought to exorcise from his own heart by inflicting it on others. I prayed he might go through this purification, this purgatory, because I want to love him in the way God has loved me: a sinner, yet redeemed by love. I cannot fathom how deep was his despair, how horribly the *"intrinsic disorder"* of hate that grew in him and led him into the hands of death. Yet, I believe that he is, still, a child of God: my poor, angry, and hurtful brother. It isn't an easy prayer, but as I pray for his victims—for Antonio Brown and Corry Connell, for Leroy Fernandez and Brenda McCool, for Enrique Rios, and Xavier Rosado, for all the women and men killed or wounded, and for the families and friends who mourn—I know I have to pray for him, as well. *"Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect,"* i.e., be complete in your love, as God's love is complete. I am not there yet, but we have to try.

There have been so many horrible events, so many senseless acts of hatred and violence, that have occurred in the last years—against people at the movies or civil servants eating lunch, against a circle of prayer in Charleston or toddlers gathered in Newtown—that we can grow dull and lose our sense of reality. But genuine prayer, not the bland repetition of tired words, but the prayer that comes from our soul, and cries out to the God of life and death, unites us to the world and to each person. True prayer carries us to those who suffer, as Christ himself encountered them; and with Christ, we do not hide from pain or loss, but embrace it with love. We are called to accompany the victims—the dead, the mourning, the wounded—because we are one with them, and one with Omar, as well. For he, too, is our brother, even though lost in the darkness of rage and hatred.

In Orlando, where the victims of this shooting are members of the LGBTQ community, the solidarity to which we are called has a particular poignancy, because the Church has so often shared—intentionally or unintentionally—in the suffering of men and women of this community. Yet, today, there must be no ambiguity, no hesitancy or division: the women and men at Pulse that night, the members of the LGBTQ community everywhere are our sisters and brothers. They are part of the body of Christ, wounded and weeping in the streets of our nation. We, who find our mission in the *"field hospital"* of the Church, must stand with them as one community, one People of God, one family in sorrow and in hope, in the face of violence and in the power of love; but more than that, we must also move with them to alleviate this evil, this two-headed sin of bigotry and violence by which so many have been made to suffer.

The gay community has been an object of rage and persecution throughout history. Men (and it is usually men), struggling with issues of powerlessness and looking for scapegoats, have sought to vent their rage on those seen as different and vulnerable, those often unprotected by society. Indeed, much of the impetus for the gay pride and gay rights movement arises from resistance to the “*gay bashing*” that marked many major cities—when groups of young men would seek out gay bars or “*suspect*” individuals, looking to inflict harm on those whom society had already condemned or criminalized, labeled as “*deviant*” and “*immoral*.” Sometimes such “*bashing*” has been done under the cover of law, by police departments, and sometimes it is done by angry men who clothed their violence in the distorted guise of religious righteousness. Encouraged by the hateful rhetoric of “*abomination*” and “*disordered*” from ministers (or Imam), who proclaim divine judgment on homosexuals, “*gay bashers*,” and even murderers, have elevated their personal demons into a call of God. For those of us in the Church, this history demands a different stance, one that calls us not to begin with judgment, but first to embrace and accompany our LGBTQ sisters and brothers

There is a difference, however, between “*traditional*” gay-bashing vigilantes and what happened in Orlando—though not, I think, a difference in kind. The shooter, like any “*gay basher*,” drowned his humanity in a sea of violence and despair. He sought an “*other*” upon whom he could take out his rage, and seeing that “*other*” in the LGBTQ community, whose very joy and pride made them more hateful to him, he sought to destroy them. And if he used ISIS and a distorted vision of his own Islamic tradition to make his own feelings seem part of something greater, he only follows in the footsteps of those who have similarly twisted Christianity and spoken of themselves as defenders of Western civilization. No. The difference in Orlando is not one of kind, but of degree: a difference explainable only by the accessibility of a lightweight assault weapon that held more than 100 rounds of ammunition. “*Guns*,” say the bumper sticker, “*don’t kill people; people kill people*.” Perhaps that is true, but people who kill people with AR-15 assault rifles kill a lot more of them—by many orders of magnitude.

What then must we do? What is the Christian response to this attack in Orlando? First, we must accompany those attacked, standing in solidarity with our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. Second, we must resist the simplistic temptations to return evil with evil, choosing instead to love as God loves, with a mercy that heals and redeems what has been wounded. Rather than looking for some enemy to hate, we must overcome hate by reaching out to our enemies with courage. Third and finally, we must act to prevent the scope of this evil from being repeated by changing the laws that allow such carnage. And if some cite, with Scriptural reverence, the Second Amendment, I would point to the Preamble of the same document, which calls us to a deeper responsibility to “*insure domestic tranquility*,” and “*promote the general welfare*.” Or, perhaps we might just quote Jesus, who calls us, with Peter, to “*Put your sword back in its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*” (Mt. 26:52). Enough have perished. It is time for peace.