For Personal Reflection

?

1. Has my faith in a good, caring and provident God been shaken by such tragic events as September 11, 2001?
2. Does my faith help me to deal with tragic events, either public or private? If yes, how? If no, why not?
3. How do I find comfort when I am affected by things like sickness, separation or death?
4. People claim that sharing sorrow or grief can lessen the pain. Is this your experience?
5. How do I try to comfort those who suffer? How have others tried to comfort me?
6. How would I answer the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Further Reading

Treatise on the Love of God: St. Francis de Sales. Book IV, Chapter 8.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner. Many editions.

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Volume 4 **Number 8**

Salesian Perspectives is a series of pamphlets published by De Sales Spirituality Services. The series offers practical approaches to holiness based on the lives and legacies of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. Subscription information is available by contacting De Sales Spirituality Services. © 2005 by De Sales Spirituality Services. All rights reserved.

How Do We Deal...

Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS

SALESIAN PERSPECTIVES

With Tragic Events?

As believers, we try to see all the events of life with the eyes of God, even those including suffering, loss, tragedy and death. Our faith challenges us to believe that the redemptive and saving power of the Cross of Christ is present in all our experiences, especially in those most painful.

But the terrible natural disaster known as Katrina perhaps has understandably shaken our faith. We wonder aloud, or in the quiet of our hearts: "Where was God on the day Katrina came ashore?" "How could a loving and all-powerful God allow such a horrible thing to occur?" "Why does God allow such terrible things to happen to good, innocent people?"

"Our faith challenges us to believe that the redemptive power of the Cross of Christ is present in all things...."

How do I answer these and similar questions for others? For that matter, how do I answer them for myself?

I remember one attempt at explaining this mystery that I heard when I was in graduate school. When you look at the back of a tapestry all you see are knotted and gnarled threads that are intertwined in a chaotic and unsightly fashion. This appearance is confusing at best, outright ugly at worst. By contrast, the front of the tapestry is beautiful, a masterpiece that soothes the mind, heart and spirit.

"When we come face-to-face with evil, we are looking at the back of the tapestry of life: we see chaos, sin, pain, suffering and injustice. Of course, life's tapestry has another side: goodness, justice, freedom, reconciliation and peace."

When we come face-to-face with evil, we are, as it were, looking at the back side of the tapestry of life: we see its chaos, sin, pain, suffering and injustice. Of course, even in the midst of evil, life has yet another side: goodness, justice, freedom, reconciliation and peace. Because of the victory of the Resurrection over sin, suffering and death, good has—and will—triumph over evil, despite the appearance, at times, to the contrary. At the end of history, it will be clear that love will conquer all. Until the Second Coming, only faith can find consolation in this truth.

Still, any attempt on our part to make sense of evil is ultimately unsatisfactory. How much comfort can my explanation bring to grieving parents whose child has been killed by a drunk driver? How can the image of the tapestry of life console a husband whose wife loses her fight with cancer, leaving him alone to care for four young children?

Months pass, wounds heal, life goes on, and we try to go on with it. Even to the degree that peoples' lives may return to "normal" at some point following the experience of tragic suffering, injustice or loss, are they ever really "normal" again? People will still struggle to understand why terrible things happen to any of us.

Francis de Sales himself grappled with this issue. He readily admitted that some mysteries are inscrutable, exceeding our ability to grasp them fully. This is especially true of destructive acts of nature or horrific results of the human ability to choose. For Francis de Sales, it is only in the next life that we will understand the mysteries and conflicts of this life.

"In the end, it's not our words that make the difference..."

However, we must strive to be sources of consolation and strength to others when terrible—sometimes, unspeakable—things happen to good people...or to anybody, for that matter. In the end, it is probably not our words, no matter how informed or carefully crafted, that will make a healing, sustaining difference in the lives of those men, woman and children touched by tragedy. No, what ultimately helps are hands that reach out to them in love and arms that cradle them in their grief.

How ready are our hands, our arms, and our hearts to reach out to others?