

September 17, 2001

Dear Friends,

I wanted to share with you some reflections on the terrible events of September 11 rather than wait until our next newsletter. What a shock it was to see the horrible destruction of the World Trade Center in New York and the attack on the Pentagon. Our hearts go out to the many that have lost loved ones and the great pain so many are feeling. In a special way our prayers and thoughts are with our friends in the metropolitan New York-New Jersey-Connecticut area.

As we work through our pain and shock and anger and all the other emotions that come with something like this, we also at some point need to prayerfully reflect on these events and see if there's some meaning that we can find. If this isn't the right time for you to think about these things just put this letter aside until another time.

In my own prayerful reflection on these events one of the voices I've tried to listen to has been those of the terrorists. What are they saying about why they are doing such horrible things? I've heard three main things.

The Voice of the Terrorists

They say that they are angry with the United States for what they perceive to be our one-sided support of Israel in the conflict with the Palestinians. They view our 3 billion-dollar a year support of the Israeli military forces as a direct participation in the oppression of the Palestinians. Of course this ignores or undervalues the strong efforts our country has made to bring the two parties together in a peace agreement. But this is a complex issue and one I can't deal with adequately in this letter.

A second thing I've heard from these voices is that they resent what they perceive as the arrogance of America, which is now viewed as the only remaining super-power in the world. They perceive America as acting for our own economic, political and military interests without regard for the good of other cultures and countries. This of course ignores all the ways America has lent a helping hand to countries around the world and welcomed waves of immigrants to our own shores since its founding; but who would claim that America has never acted in a self-serving manner which has gravely injured and humiliated others? Whatever the case, it would certainly be worthwhile for us to reflect on how we use our power and prosperity now as the one remaining "super power." Certainly scripture indicates that God judges harshly the abuse of economic and political power at the expense of the poor and the oppressed. Power and prosperity are gifts from God but they must be used in a just way, for the common good, and not just for the advancement of American business interests, at the expense of other countries and cultures.

The third thing I'm hearing though is the most troubling because it seems to be for the most part clearly true. These voices are saying that they are angry with the United States because it is exporting cultural and ideological forces that are undermining morality and decency in the world and polluting the minds and hearts of countless sons and daughters throughout the world. It's hard to face this but I'm afraid it is true.

Everywhere in our travels we find the pervasive and powerful influence of American music, television, movies and grossly immodest fashions. I feel angry myself as I see my own children and young people throughout the world assaulted by this cesspool of depravity that issues freely from the American “entertainment industry.”

Might this not be a time when we need, as a country, to examine our conscience in this regard? Are we polluting the world, not just through our industry, but through our exaltation of immorality?

We certainly need to deal with the evil that has been done to us in these attacks. Those responsible and those who assist them or harbor them need to be justly punished. (But we also need to remember that vengeance belongs to the Lord and not to us. To relate negatively to Arabs and Moslems because of the relatively few who are committed to evil would be offensive to the Lord.) But might this not also be a time when we need to look at the evil among us and seriously repent and ask God for his mercy?

The Voice of Our Leaders

Another voice I’m listening to is that of our government leaders and leaders of countries that are our allies. Our own leaders speak of the callous disregard for human life that is demonstrated by the terrorists and that is certainly true. The Prime Minister of Great Britain recently deplored the total lack of regard for the “sanctity of human life” that the terrorists are demonstrating. Are our leaders blind to the total lack of respect for life that has been enshrined in our laws and culture? Are they blind to the millions of babies that continue to be aborted? Have they forgotten the barbaric decision to permit the continuation of partial birth abortion where a fully viable infant is cold-bloodedly murdered? (And isn’t this the same language used now to describe the terrorists!) What about the elderly and handicapped that are dispatched by the will of man rather than the will of God, and the experimentation on human embryos that is permitted in limited cases here and in almost unrestricted ways in Britain? **Is anybody noticing the irony, the hypocrisy, of deploring the lack of respect of life in others, and ignoring it in ourselves? John Paul II has been gently but firmly warning America for years that its greatness could crumble if it didn’t restore its respect for life from the moment of conception to natural death.**

What the terrorists have done is very evil and truly demonic, and it must be severely punished. But is the lack of respect of life in abortion and growing euthanasia and experimentation on human embryos in our countries less evil and demonic? Does this not also deserve severe punishment?

The Voice of the Lord

A third voice I’m listening to is that of the Lord, particularly in the scripture as he communicates his wisdom and laws that govern human life.

One thing that scripture makes very clear is that indeed there is only one super-power in the universe, and it’s not the United States; it’s the Lord. All the nations are passing mists compared to the Lord. It’s the Lord who raises up and casts down. And one of his laws is that pride goes before the fall, and that he who exalts

himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted. There are divine laws that no legislature or court can overturn.

“Why do the nations rage and the peoples utter folly? The Kings of the earth rise up, and the princes conspire together against the Lord and against his anointed: ‘Let us break their fetters and cast their bonds from us!’ He who is throned in heaven laughs; the Lord derides them.” Psalm 2:1-4

It is so important that we use our prosperity and power in a humble, godly way Our survival as a nation depends on it!

In the book of Hosea we read how the idolatry, arrogance and immorality of Israel is dealt harshly with by the Lord, but not without the purpose and promise of mercy.

“In their perversity they have sunk into wickedness, and I am rejected by them all...for the spirit of harlotry is in them and they do not recognize the Lord...the arrogance of Israel bears witness against him...they have been untrue to the Lord...upon them I pour out my wrath like water...he has willingly gone after filth...When Ephraim saw his infirmity, and Judah his sore, Ephraim went to Assyria, and Judah sent to the great king. But he cannot heal you nor take away your sore... I will go back to my place until they pay for their guilt and seek my presence. In their affliction they shall look for me: ‘Come, let us return to the Lord, For it is he who has rent, but he will heal us; he has struck us, but he will bind our wounds.” (Hosea 5-6:1)

It is significant that the two major targets hit were the World Trade Center, the symbol of America’s economic power which affects the whole world, and the Pentagon, the symbol of America’s military power which intervenes throughout the world. As great as this power may appear to human beings it can disappear in an instant if the Lord removes his hand of protection.

It would be totally unwarranted to assume in any way that those in the World Trade Center or Pentagon were guiltier than anyone else. Jesus himself warns us not to draw this conclusion.

“Take those 18 who were killed by a falling tower in Siloam. Do you think they were more guilty than anyone else who lived in Jerusalem? Certainly not! But I tell you, you will all come to the same end unless you repent.” (Lk.13:1-5)

Our Response

Jesus specifically invites us to take occasions of disasters like this as an opportunity to examine our conscience and see if we’re ready to meet the Lord, and if not, to take appropriate action.

Have we received a great and significant warning in what has happened? Whatever the worldly causes are for these tragedies and whatever we think of them, isn't it important that we take this as a time of reflection? Isn't it important that "business" (and entertainment and sports) not go on "as usual" and ignore what must be seriously pondered, prayed about and responded to? **I believe we have received a call to repentance that's serious and urgent.** I also believe that the hour is late, and that it's important that we respond now, or what we have just experienced may simply be the beginning of a great unraveling filled with terror. **It's time for all of us to return to God in whatever way we may have strayed or ignored him, and avail ourselves of his mercy, while there is still time.**

There are many wonderful signs that indeed this may be happening. The turning to God, the speaking of prayer and spiritual realities on major television programs, the crowding of churches and synagogues and mosques, the new sense of solidarity and patriotism are all indications that these disasters have profoundly impacted our souls. God didn't cause these terrible disasters **yet he permits human beings in their freedom to do evil only because he is able to bring even greater good out of it.** He is a God that redeems and saves and transforms. He takes even the depth of sorrow and sin and changes it into "something beautiful for God." **Ultimately, love is more powerful than hatred, hope more powerful than despair, and faith is more powerful than any force of evil in the universe.**

It's important also that we continue to pray for wisdom for all of the nations' leaders as they make decisions and take actions that will affect the whole world.

Your brother in Jesus,

Ralph Martin