

Mass of the Holy Spirit

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In the face of this tragedy whose immensity we do not understand and may never adequately comprehend, I am reminded of Anne Lamott's story in *Traveling Mercies* about the little girl who got lost on her way home from school. She ran up and down the streets of her neighborhood, but could not find her own house. The frightened child was relieved when a police officer stopped and put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around looking for her home. Finally she saw the church, and she told the policeman that he could let her out now because she recognized the church, and she could always find her way home from there.

Today, we are lost, frightened and confused so we come to church in the hope that we may find our way home from here. Coming together here, today says a good deal about how we will ultimately find our way home. We go home together.

We are like those disciples that we heard about in the second reading – huddled together in one place because we are afraid. We – among the most diverse Universities in the country – are also Medes, Elamites and Parthians, but we gathered together in this church to take a deeper look at ourselves and realize that beneath the superficial characteristics that distinguish us, one from the other, we are brothers and sisters all, members of the one human family of God. We gather together as that family to mourn the loss of too many of our brothers and sisters and we pray in solidarity with their families and friends who carry the heaviest burden of sorrow and loss.

Today violence has rocked this country in ways previously unknown by us, and sent shock waves around the world. What is a one-time occurrence for us is woven into the fabric of daily life for our brothers and sisters in Africa, Northern Ireland, Palestine, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. Today we see first hand the consequences of violence and hatred, unrestrained by reason or compassion. Today we acknowledge that hatred and violence are inherently destructive and lead only to darkness and death, never home. Let us determine not to return hatred with hatred or violence with violence, but to draw deep from the wellspring of our humanity and produce living waters that offer more abundant life to all men and women, not just a privileged few.

Today we taste the bitter fruits of the spirit of darkness and destruction, and in the face of that spirit we dare to invoke a different Spirit; we pray together that God's Holy Spirit may take possession of our hearts and direct our own lives and this University. We pray that God's Spirit may empower us and the University to be good news for the poor at home and abroad, comfort to sorrowing people in New York and across the globe, consolation to the broken hearted everywhere and liberty to those held captive by fear and ignorance. May God's Holy Spirit displace the evil spirit of vengeance and revenge and guide our response to this tragedy over the days and weeks ahead.

If nothing else, we can see clearly now that life is fragile. How do we make of this world

a place that sustains the life that we share with all men and women, rather than a breeding place of hatred and violence? When will we get the insight that we are all vulnerable and that when one of us bleeds – no matter our color or continent – we all do; that no one of us may prosper at the expense of others?

In the face of this overwhelming tragedy, we recall the words of Jesus from the Gospel, “do not let your hearts be troubled; do not be afraid.” I remember a summer many years back when I was working in the Bahamas. I went to the beach one afternoon. An old fashioned wooden-sided station drove up to the edge of the sand and kids came piling out – like one of those gag cars at a circus from which one clown after another emerges. All of the kids ran right for the water and dove in, with one exception – the smallest boy, who sat on the crest of the beach playing with the sand, while all the other kids taunted him and teasingly urged him to come out into the water. He was afraid. He did not know how to swim. He would drown. No way he was going into that water. Then the large woman who drove the car walked out into the water up to her thighs and motioned for the kid to come to her. She said, “come on out; don’t be afraid.” That little boy got up and walked out into the arms of his mother. He was still afraid. He still didn’t know how to swim, but it was his mother calling him and that made all the difference. He knew that his mother would never ask him to do anything harmful, and so he walked through the water into the arms of his mother who loved him more than anything in this world. Much like that child, we reaffirm today that beneath all the turmoil and the violence that make us anxious and afraid, is the voice of God calling us home and God would never allow us to be destroyed. We reaffirm our faith that God’s love calls us through any and every human threat, even death itself, to the fullness of life with God, forever. Our hearts are surely troubled today, but we need not be afraid because we are moving together towards the arms of a loving God who ever and always calls us safely home.

So what do we do now? We do what members of the human family everywhere do in difficult times. We come together to pray, to sing songs, to share bread and wine and to comfort one another however we can. We keep the deceased and the injured in our hearts, and we are of life a little more careful than we have ever been.

As a university community, we renew our commitment and strengthen our resolve to USF’s Jesuit educational mission. Can anyone today argue that we do not need persons who will fashion a more just and humane world? Does anyone not see the world’s need for men and women who live their lives for others and not simply for themselves? Is it even possible to talk of faith in God that does do justice in this world? Can any of us question the necessity of promoting a common good that transcends the interests of particular groups or individuals? Is there any doubt that reasoned discourse and persuasion, not coercion and violence, are the only tools with which to make a better world?

We leave here today knowing that we all members of one human family and that guided by God’s Spirit, we can care for one another and we can work together to make this world the place that God would have it be, and by so doing, we will find our way home.

