

COLUMNISTS

Our response gives meaning to suffering

It has been over a month since the tragic and shocking massacre at the Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. The likely explanations have been presented and debated — parental neglect, a breakdown of societal morality, the easy availability of assault weapons, the lack of metal detectors and armed security guards at schools, the perverse influence of violently graphic video games and films, of certain kinds of music, and of material on the Internet.

While almost all of the attention was on human behavior, a few did raise the centuries-old question regarding divine behavior: How could a good and loving God allow this tragedy to happen?

Three classic answers emerged. The first was that the tragedy in Littleton raised again the possibility, even the likelihood, that a good and loving God simply does not exist. The incident — regrettably — only reinforces the validity of atheism, or at least of agnosticism.

According to the second answer, the tragedy in Colorado (and similar tragedies) has to be seen as part of a larger divine plan. God has a purpose of which we are presently unaware, and will somehow bring good out of evil.

For the third, the infliction of a new evil is God's way of punishing a prior



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

evil. When some portion of the human community loses its moral compass and perpetrates terrible offenses against the divine law, God takes revenge in order to "right" the wrong. Indeed, that was the thinking that motivated the young men who carried out the massacre in Colorado. They felt aggrieved because of the perceived "evils" inflicted upon them by the "preps" and the "jocks" at Columbine High, so they punished their "tormentors" with an even greater evil — just like God supposedly does.

Many people, however, do not accept any of these three explanations of divine behavior — or non-behavior.

Atheism leaves too many questions unanswered. How explain the created world? How explain the goodness and beauty in it? How explain, for example,

countless self-sacrificial acts of so many people over the course of human history, in literally laying down their lives for others? And how explain the deep-seated conviction of so many ordinary people — educated and uneducated alike — that there is more to life than meets the eye?

Although the second explanation has more takers than the first, many people also reject that view, namely, that tragedies of this sort are simply part of God's larger plan. God does not cause evil, but only permits it to happen. Ordinary people, however, believe that there has to be a better way for God to advance the divine plan.

Moreover, in allowing such terrible evils to occur, God becomes no different from the bystander who sees a vicious crime about to be committed and makes no effort to stop it or to notify the police. In some jurisdictions, such a failure is itself a criminal act.

The objection that many people raise against the third answer, that God punishes evil with evil, is that it cannot explain why God would punish the innocent along with the guilty — just as the young killers in Littleton murdered innocent students and a teacher along with their designated targets the preps and the jocks. God is supposed to bring good

out of evil, not add to the evil.

None of the greatest minds of human history and not even the church itself have devised a comprehensive and compelling answer to the problem of evil. What they have pointed out is that our response to evil is within our power to shape. We can rebel and revolt against evil, shaking an angry fist at God in the style of Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov. Or we can bear up under it stoically, accepting what we can neither understand nor change. Or we can stand with Job, placing our complete trust in God even in the face of the incomprehensible, and with Jesus himself, from whom we have received the good news that God wishes to deliver us from all evil and that suffering is redemptive.

Although we cannot grasp the meaning of suffering induced by evil, suffering can acquire meaning by the way we freely respond to it. We can learn from it, or close our eyes and minds to its lessons. We can be ennobled by it, or become embittered. We can grow through it, or regress because of it.

In the Christian vision of reality, resurrection follows the cross.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

To reflect Trinity, think of others

Trinity Sunday: (R3) John 3:16-18. (R1) Exodus 34:4-6, 8-9. (R2) 2 Corinthians 13:11-13.

On the Sunday after Pentecost we celebrate the feast of the Holy Trinity. The great message of the Old Testament was, God is one. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone!" (Dt. 6:4). The great revelation of the New Testament is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; namely, that in this one God there are three divine persons.

St. John defined God as love — "God is love" (John 4:16).

But how could God be love if from all eternity God had no one to love? How could his love be divine unless there was someone divine to love? As one cannot clap with one hand, so love demands another: the beloved. It takes two to tangle, two to tango and two to love. Scripture uses two words to describe God's love: Word and Son. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). When Jesus was baptized, a voice from heaven proclaimed: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11).

Furthermore, love is something between two. When a boy and girl go



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

steady, we say, "There's something between those two. Wedding bells will soon be ringing." So God's love is something between two: between the Father and the Son. As human love expresses itself in giving, so divine love gives. And the gift of Father to Son and Son to Father is their very selves. But this divine self is distinct from them both. As the gift of husband to wife and wife to husband terminates in a person, so the gift of Father to Son and Son to Father terminates in a divine person distinct from them both. We call this person the Holy Spirit.

So even though our God is a one God, he is not a lonely God, for in the one God there are three divine persons: the lover, the beloved and the love. The lover is the Father, source of all life; the

beloved is the Son, source of all truth; and the love is the Holy Spirit, source of all love. Life, love and truth are the least common denominator of all happiness. Thus God is perfectly happy. Because he is and because he is good, he willed to share that happiness with us.

So in divine deliberation they said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. God created man in his image, male and female he created them" (Gn. 1:26-27). And God gave man the power to love, so that through love for each other, man and wife might create the family and thus reflect the triune God who made them: Fathers reflect God the Father, mothers reflect God the Holy Spirit, and children reflect God the Son.

If we are to image the Trinity we must become like the persons in the Trinity. The persons in the Trinity are persons not only because they are individual, that is, one is not the other; but especially, because they are related to each other. Their relatedness is what we must strive to imitate.

A father must think in terms of his wife and children.

A mother must think in terms of her husband and children.

Children must think in terms of their

father and mother.

In choosing a career in life, a good standard would be to ask ourselves, "How can I best serve others?"

Then truly we shall reflect the Trinity: sharing life, love and truth with all others, as do Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, May 31

Zephaniah 3:14-18 or Romans 12:9-16; Luke 1:39-56

Tuesday, June 1

Tobias 2:9-14; Mark 12:13-17

Wednesday, June 2

Tobias 3:1-11, 16-17; Mark 12:18-27

Thursday, June 3

Tobias 6:10-11, 7:1, 9-17, 8:4-9;

Mark 12:28-34

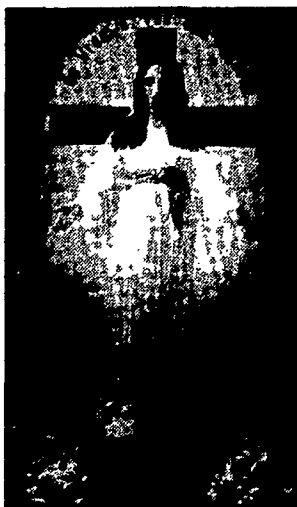
Friday, June 4

Tobias 11:5-17; Mark 12:35-37

Saturday, June 5

Tobias 12:1, 5-15, 20;

Mark 12:38-44

I your Mother, am coming to visit you as
THE MOTHER AND LADY OF ALL NATIONS

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, send NOW Your Spirit over the earth. Let the Holy Spirit live in the hearts of ALL nations, that they may be preserved from degeneration, disaster, and war. May The Lady Of All Nations, who once was Mary, be our advocate. Amen

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