Every other year at DeSales University, I teach a senior-level course called “The World of Evil.” This course has grown to be quite popular for two reasons. First, it gives students about to enter the real world an opportunity to confront troubling issues. Second, discussion centers on how movies depict the various themes that are debated in class.

Despite the surreal look to the photographs, we know all too well that what happened in New York City and Washington, DC is not a movie but something painfully real. The losses suffered, the sorrow felt, the fear kindled, and the retaliation sought are all sensible experiences that bring home an awareness of something that transcends our individual lives. Yet it is important that we name accurately what has happened. We begin and end my course with three questions that are pertinent to the clamorous discussions now taking place throughout our country: (1) What is evil? (2) Whence does it come? (3) What, if anything, can we do about it?

People differ in their speech about what happened. For most, it is a senseless tragedy, in which innocent lives were lost in a way that confounds any lucid explanation. But this is not entirely accurate. To those who perpetrated the acts of destruction, what took place made complete sense. Their acts were purposeful and deliberate and intentional. The catastrophic results make it hard to fathom, but at least to some minds there is a reason behind it.

Political strategists consider these attacks to be an act of war. The precision strikes were discharged on U.S. soil by organized forces inimical to the American way of life. But this war
lacks a clearly identified combatant, a formal declaration, and an international dispute that usually occasions such a conflict.

More than tragedy, more than war, the wanton destruction of life and property that has desecrated our land is an act of evil. To call this attack “evil” is not merely lip service to an inexplicable calamity. It is to name it what it really is. No longer is evil the “banal” reality to which Hannah Arendt referred when speaking of the horrors wrought by Adolf Eichmann. Last week’s evil is both novel, in terms of its extent, and immediate in terms of its impact. This evil is ugly. But, as M. Scott Peck notes, “We cannot begin to hope to heal human evil until we are able to look at it directly.” Now we have seen it. Thanks to television coverage, its image is indelibly etched in our collective mind.

Whence comes this evil? Some say it is the work of madmen. Whether individually or in cells, these suicidal crimes against humanity are terroristic plots so gruesome that those who carried them out must be crazy. Others lay the blame on misguided religious and/or political aspirations. Taliban and Jihad are fast becoming part of a lexicon that describes the dangerously wrong turns that ideologies can instigate.

But the ultimate source of this evil is neither the mind of the attackers nor the socio-political persuasions to which they subscribe. This evil is deeper. It resides in the soul. There where our humanness is fashioned, where we vacillate between angel and beast, this evil rears its ugly head and brings the human spirit down to the level of animal aggression. In this abyss of hatred that can engulf the human spirit, the callous disregard for life becomes a comprehensive way of thought and feeling and action.

As Pope John Paul II described it, what transpired that fateful Tuesday was an “inhuman act.” It was a “dark day in the history of humanity,” for it disclosed to all of us the sad reality that “(t)he human heart has depths from which schemes of unheard-of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying in a moment the normal daily life of a people.”

It is necessary that we acknowledge these attacks as evil and locate its provenance within the human spirit. Only then we will be in the best position to respond. What, if anything, can we do about this evil? Our immediate response is the humanitarian one. We should cry, as so many have done, over this indignant affront to human life. We should provide aid, as so many are doing, because we share a common human dignity.

Political decisions will provide a strategic response. Retribution can and will be pursued, not as a government-asserted act of vengeance but as a measure of necessary justice. Freedom, as an inviolable right that distinguishes the human from the animal, should and will be defended.

But neither compassionate charity nor military might will eradicate human evil. Barbaric acts of terror are ultimately manifestations of a debased spirit. Only a supernatural power will be adequate to respond to this human depravity. It is a telling sign that so many people, in so many ways, have turned to prayer during this crisis. Almost instinctively, our human spirit is guided by an inner sense of faith, aspiring as it were to rise above the frightful reality of spiritual decadence made evident by these dreadful deeds.
This transcendent response is necessary to restore the human spirit to its unique prominence. Belief in God, particularly in times when a divine absence seems apparent, is what gives us hope and what sustains our efforts to be and to live. In Dr. Peck’s analysis, “That hope is our answer: goodness can succeed. ... Evil can be conquered only by love.” And love, as the pope reminds us, “is more powerful than any kind of evil in which individuals, humanity, or the world are involved. Believing in this love means believing in mercy.”

Many people ask whether we will be able to return to a normal way of life. The answer is “yes,” but it comes with a qualification, namely, that we acknowledge evil as part of the reality of this way of life, while maintaining that goodness is superior to it. When faith and hope and love and mercy rule the day, then our culture will stand forever strong.

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