



A Christian Response to the Mandalay Bay Tragedy

By: Father Nathan Reesman

A great deal of ink has already been spilled with reactions to the tragic shooting episode in Las Vegas that took place on the 1st of October, and no doubt much more will be said in the days and weeks ahead as America digests yet another disturbing episode of violence. I will offer a few comments as well, as a pastor, in the midst of what could be called a “teachable moment” for us all.

Suffering Unleashes Prayer and Love

First and foremost, events such as this one are always a summons to prayer. As Christians we understand that prayer is not the last resort, but rather is the first thing that we do, trusting that our Father hears us, and that he weeps as we weep. The killing, within minutes, of 59 people and the injuring of hundreds and hundreds more produces a mountain of emotional, spiritual, physical, and political wreckage. Only prayer and only faith can bring healing at the deepest of personal levels.

The good news in this story is the heroism of the law enforcement officials, the long lines of would-be blood donors, and the outpouring of support. As Saint John Paul II wrote at the very end of his beautiful apostolic letter on the meaning of human suffering, hardship is allowed by God, or exists, to unleash love in the world. Love has indeed been unleashed in response to a blatant attack on human life, and that love will bring healing.

Our Secular Limitations Have Been Laid Bare

What also brings healing is truth, and that, too, needs to be spoken in response to all of this. One hard truth is that abortions and incidents of gun violence claim a staggering amount of lives all across our nation on a daily basis, and yet our public reaction to this fact is often quite muted and desensitized. All violence is lamentable because each person is sacred, but our contemporary social fabric undermines this truth in countless ways. Deep soul searching on a cultural level was in order long before the Las Vegas shooting took place.

Still, it is also true that mass shootings like this one, especially those that target unsuspecting people, strike us as especially cold and they are unsettling in unique ways. It is important to pay attention to why that is the case.

One reason is the cold realization that we are never going to be totally safe from harm at the hands of others or simply from harm in general. A central aim or premise of Western society in recent history has been the assurance that with enough science, enough technology, enough legislation, and enough military might we can insulate ourselves from tragedy and pain as we try, more and more, to control all the things that were once so unpredictable and uncontrollable, from hurricanes, to hepatitis, to hijackings.

In the face of this widely accepted premise, the Las Vegas shooting reveals to us the radical limits of our own human mechanisms, and the flimsy reality of our self assurance. It reveals the failure of government and of (apparently) civil society to protect the innocent. For a culture that has placed so much trust in its structures, that is a hard reality to face.

Focusing Only On Guns Does Not Look Deeply Enough

This is why the debate over gun control, before and after these awful tragedies, is so fierce. Advocates for gun ownership sense, rightly so, that in a world of barbaric possibilities, we must be able to defend ourselves precisely because the social structures that promise us such protection ultimately cannot deliver what they are selling. Hence the American default reaction to news of deadly attacks is to fall back on the security of personal, individual, self-defense and with it, guns.

Of course, the fact is that guns all by themselves do not protect us either, ultimately, which is the great myth of the gun lobby agenda. Still, we cling to these earthly solutions whenever we sense that other entities, such as big government and mother technology, have failed.

It is quite revealing that the almost instantaneous response to this shooting coalesced around such a horizontal, non-transcendent, and earthly remedy for this situation: gun legislation, either for or against. It shows how secular all of our thinking has become in mainstream cultural and media circles.

Laws, regulations, science, technology, and a government are helpful things. Indeed, even guns are helpful things in a fallen world. They are all basically morally neutral entities. But, they also are all limited in their power.

All the gun restrictions in the world are not going to stop the human person from inflicting mass harm and chaos if they are Hell- bent on doing so. One has only to look at the recent terrorist attacks that utilize such seemingly innocuous objects as trucks and cars driving into crowds, or that fly airplanes into buildings, to see that the desire to carry out evil is remarkably inventive. Guns are not really the point. They are a side issue, even if they are an important thing to discuss.

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Secular Society Craves A Motive

More illuminating in the Las Vegas situation has been the relentless pursuit of a motive. Customarily, motives are really only important in a criminal trial so that guilt and judgment can be determined and dispensed. However, this killer is dead so there will be no earthly trial.

But, we are putting him on trial anyway in a sense. This is the case because the other very unsettling reality to confront is that we cannot seem to explain the killer, or his intentions, using any of our conventional categories. In life, especially in our era of science and technology, we soothe ourselves with ready explanations, causes, and answers. But, in this case, we seem to have come up empty, and it really upsets us. In all of our hubris, we cannot handle such a blatant limitation to the perceived powers of our insight.

The fact is that in our modern era, most of the “whys” we have often come up with are purely sociological or psychological in nature. Those fields of study are our modern-day religion and authority. We would like to blame economics in this situation, or insanity perhaps, or religious fanaticism, or hatred, or some political agenda. All of those explanations would make us feel better about it all because then this heinous act would be tidily categorized under the vast heading of sociology and the mechanical certitude of programmed behavioral norms that have become our new cultural bible.

We Are All Capable of Murder

It appears, however, that this killer was a very rational man. Antisocial and self absorbed, but, otherwise he appears in many respects to be a lot like all the rest of us.

And there is the rub: in the absence of a clear motive, and therefore the safe distance of a “category,” in this case, we are left with the stark reality that every single one of us, me included, is capable of murder, evil, and plunder. The government, science, technology, gobs of money, even gobs of self-protective guns cannot save us from this simple truth. We can all kill each other off today, in fact, if we really want to just by using our bare hands.

This particular killer represents so many of the worst parts of our modern culture that we are driven by in the West: independence, self gratification, addiction to gambling and money, materialism, using other people (like his girlfriend who he lured away from a marriage and her children) just to name a few. What does it all lead to in its worst form? A simmering anger with self, life, and the world, that explodes in the public manner that we tragically witnessed.

Simply put, he represents the vast human capacity for sin in which each of us also shares, without exception. And our Western culture today has become a magnifier, or a lightning rod, for that same capacity.

The Divine Remedy of Grace and Greatness

In the face of all of this, a Christian explains this tragedy, and the flaws of our culture, with the truths of our tradition. We are sad, and we can legitimately wonder why God would allow such things. But, we also know that we are free, that there is sin, there is evil, and that God does not desire for any of us who are his children such an empty life as this killer apparently lived.

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We know that Christ stretches out a hand to save us as persons, and as a nation. We know that grace can change our distorted natures, and that a warped societal fabric can be re-woven with the truth and power of the Commandments and of the Gospel.

We know that purely secular remedies are inadequate, and that we all stand in judgment before God, and also that we can all be raised up to greatness by his transforming grace. We know that love is stronger than death, that prayer moves mountains, and that societal order and peace are divine gifts given to persons, and nations, who are open to God’s holy will.

We know that only in the revealed truths of our Christian tradition do we have the most complete framework on which to build a just culture, and the intellectual tools to settle the fierce social debates in which we are currently engaged. Without Christ, we simply walk in circles, or in the darkness, with no hope of moving forward.

When sad events like Las Vegas happen, we Christians must proclaim the powerful and healing message that we know to be the truth about life, death, and reality. In these things we must be confident because they are the truth. The truth sets us free. The truth heals persons, and nations. Now, as always, it is our job to proclaim it out of love for ourselves, for our country, and for God.