

October 18, 2001

## Let The Gospel Light Banish the Darkness

*Statement on Terrorism by the Community of St. Francis Inn, Philadelphia*

We, the undersigned laity, sisters and friars of St. Francis Inn, in partnership with the San Damiano Spiritual Center, in Philadelphia, would like to make a modest contribution from our evangelical perspective to the wide-ranging discussions presently going on in our country following the horrific destruction of September 11.

We view those heartbreaking events as a crisis, understood in the oriental sense: a crisis is a dangerous opportunity. The dangers are obvious and have received much attention. We also recognize them, but would prefer to explore the question: what are the new opportunities God's providence is offering us in the tragedy we have been through. At least five such opportunities beckon: the opportunity to make wise decisions; the opportunity to make a sincere national examination of conscience; the opportunity for a genuine spiritual revival; the opportunity to recommit ourselves to the cause of justice, peace, and care for the environment; and the opportunity to express solidarity with our Moslem brothers and sisters.

1. **Wisdom knocks.** Wisdom will enable us to see beyond the reality of terrorism, and discover the foundational causes of that deplorable phenomenon. Wisdom will enable us to be creative, and see that responding to violence with more violence may perhaps make a tragic situation worse. Horrific as were the events of September 11, if biological or chemical weapons had been used we might be mourning the deaths not of thousands but of millions. Wisdom will help us to answer certain essential questions: what are some other alternatives to violence? How can we in these circumstances live the scriptural injunction to "not be overcome by evil but overcome evil by doing good"? We are in need of wise leaders. A high IQ is not enough. Even in our recent past men known as "the best and the brightest" made decisions that they themselves later came to see were very misguided.
2. **Conversion knocks.** In the present climate of a resurgence of patriotism it may not seem popular, but our nation needs to face honestly many serious offenses that continue to produce poisonous fruit. Our government has not always been on the side of the angels. We have sided with and supported governments that were corrupt and notoriously oppressive of their own people. Millions of people nurture a bitter resentment and even hatred against the United States. Many Americans find it difficult to understand that, but we need to look at the reasons for others' anger, and correct what needs correcting. Jeremiah's admonition is appropriate for nations as well as for individuals: "Acknowledge your guilt!" (3:13). That is the first step in conversion. We are a great nation, but our country is in need of conversion.
3. **Prayer knocks.** "To those who love God, all things work for the good" said St. Paul. God can, in His goodness and power, bring good out of the recent deplorable events. The

media reported that on the Sunday following September 11, churches across the land were almost as full as on Christmas! The tragic events taught us that living in "the world's only superpower" does not guarantee safety. The massive buildup of weapons of destruction that our country engaged in, costing hundreds of billions of dollars, proved totally useless for our nation's defense on September 11. So people turned to God. Living in very different times the psalmist made a similar discovery: "A king is not saved by a mighty army, nor is a warrior delivered by great strength. A vain hope for safety is the horse, despite its power it cannot save" (ps. 33)..What is the solution? "We are strong in the name of the Lord our God" (ps. 20). Are we not being graced with the opportunity for a genuine spiritual revival? We need to deepen our lives of prayer and help the people we serve to do the same. The Liturgy can help greatly. Specifically, a prayerful reflection on the readings in the lectionary of the Masses For Peace and Justice, and In Time of War or Civil Disturbance (nn. [831 ff]), and celebrating those Masses and the Eucharistic Prayers for Reconciliation, are especially opportune.

4. Justice and Peace knock. We need to recommit ourselves to the causes of justice, peace and ecology. There are about a billion Moslems in the world, and millions of them are desperately poor. Conditions in the Palestinian refugee camps are an obvious example. The world's poor know that 82.7% of the world's income goes to the top 20% (UN statistic), while 80% live on the rest. Paul VI was surely prescient when he wrote in 1971 that the inequitable distribution of the world's wealth "is a threat to the very future of the human race." Again: "if you want peace work for justice."  
We recognize that perpetrators of terrorism need to be brought to justice, but justice is not revenge. Revenge does not curtail the evil of violence; it expands it. Even the appearance of revenge needs to be avoided, and we prefer that those behind the events of September 11 be brought to trial before the World Court, or a Tribunal set up by the UN. Such a Tribunal could include Moslems of good will, so many of whom have repudiated terrorism.  
We reject violence as an inappropriate and ineffective response to the tragedy of September 11. Such a response would invite an uncontrollable spiral of atrocities. Our patron Saint, Francis of Assisi, saw in violence a sign of diabolical possession, and claimed that "violence delights the hearts of demons." Rightly the first name given to the Franciscan movement was "delegation of peace." Francis would surely agree with the claim of American Scripture scholar John McKenzie: "No reader of the New Testament ... can retain any doubt of Jesus' position towards violence directed towards persons, individual or collective: He rejected it totally." So do we.
5. Solidarity knocks. St. Francis, living in the time of the crusades, adopted an altogether unique approach to the world of Islam. The account of his visit to the Sultan of Egypt is embellished with many legends, but one thing is certain: he who showed respect to this supposed "enemy of Christ and His Cross" was himself received with the greatest respect. Many Moslems and Arabs today are suffering insults and some have suffered grave injury. We need to help the people we serve to understand that the terrorists of September 11 no more represent the Arab or Moslem world than Timothy McVeigh represented Irish Catholics. Many Moslem leaders have totally repudiated terrorism. President Mohammed Khatami of Iran, in an audience with the Pope in March of 1999, stated his

conviction that it is the "spirit of Assisi" (sic!) that needs to govern nations and religions in their relations with one another. In his address to Moslem youth in Casablanca some years ago, John Paul II told them: "You and I worship the same God." We can express solidarity with our Moslem brothers and sisters by doing that together, in inter-religious prayer services.

### **Conclusion**

Our times are turbulent but also full of promise, and in this they are not unlike other periods of great upheaval. The "barbarian invasions" in 5th century Europe were such a time, when many thought the end of the world imminent, and considered the church to be impotent in the face of impending disaster. But others saw in that very crisis a "new chance for mission." (Cf. Orosius in *Adversus Paganos*). We need to discern the new opportunities God's providence is now offering us. Opportunity knocks, let us open the door. Let the light of the gospel shine, and banish this terrible darkness!

We conclude with the words of St. Francis: "Since you speak of peace, all the more must you have peace in your hearts. Let no one be provoked to anger or scandal by you, but may they be drawn to peace and good will, to kindness and concord by your gentleness. We have been called to heal wounds, to bring together what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way."

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