

Consolation from Heaven in a Time of Tragedy

Once in a while, little miracles occur. Seemingly insignificant, they leave us wondering why God would intervene in ordinary human affairs in such an ordinary way. One such miracle occurred in my life last Tuesday.

In Ceres on business, I stopped by my former parish, St. Jude's. I needed to use their dumpster, but also wanted permission to concelebrate (that is, to assist another priest in celebrating) their evening mass. No sooner had I entered the parking lot than I nearly ran into Fr. Santos. "I've already had two masses this morning," he told me in Spanish. "The other priests are in Mexico. You can take the evening Spanish mass, if you wish."

At 6:20pm, I arrived again, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Even on days off or away from our home parishes, many of us priests try to celebrate mass on a daily basis. It's our most important responsibility and privilege.

Two young adults met me at the door. "Aren't you Fr. Daniel?" they asked, also in Spanish. I couldn't quite place their faces, though without doubt I recognized them. "Remember: last year you buried our family."

It hit me like a ton of bricks. Yes, last year, on that very same day, July 3rd, five members of the Berber family were en route from Oakdale to Madera in their Toyota van. Around the same time, a mile away from the Route 99, a young man was stealing a truck and flatbed trailer carrying a bulldozer. Apparently under the influence of alcohol, he sped toward the freeway. Running a stop sign at Road 29, swinging onto Avenue 12 near the freeway on ramp, he "crushed Berber's Toyota against the concrete and steel guard rail, where it burst into flames," the sheriff's office stated.

According to the Madera Tribune, August 4th, 2006, "Four of the family members, including a 4-year-old boy, burned to death in the crash. The fifth victim, 36-year-old Celia Berber, died two weeks later in a Fresno hospital. The family was from Lindsay. A Madera man accused of causing a crash that killed five plead not guilty to more than 15 charges, including five counts of second degree murder, according to court records."

The deceptively simple summary masks a horrible tragedy that, even to this day, remains fresh in the mind of the forty or so family members who gathered together in St. Jude's on Tuesday afternoon. The bodies of the Berbers (Balantin Lleranas, 34, and three children, 16-year-old Sulema,

10-year-old Andoney, and 4-year-old Brian) were so badly burned that the Coroner's office was unable to distinguish or to separate them. As for Celia, more than 60% of her body was covered with severe burns.

I had heard about the tragedy from a friend in Turlock, and had, by the grace of God, been able to visit the Modesto-based relatives the following day due to commitments in the area. This led to fund-raising campaigns and a visit to the Fresno hospital where Celia was in treatment. I hadn't planned to be involved further, but one Sunday evening Marco Berber called me from Fresno, saying, "Father, if you can come, Celia is dying."

That evening, I had already celebrated a mass in the Modesto area, since a priest there needed "supply" while out of town. Having no appointments on Monday morning, I hopped in the car of my buddy Alberto Godinez (a former reporter for Spanish television, Canal 19, and leader of our large-scale Hispanic outreach, "Jesucristo Pan de Vida"). We ended up spending the entire night at the hospital. Celia, wrapped completely in protective padding, suspended in mid air and rotating gradually to prevent any one part of her body from becoming infected or traumatized, face invisible beneath heavy gauze, silently agonized in the medically-induced coma which had kept her from awakening to her family's horrendous fate.

Had Celia been conscious of the truth – the terrible death of her husband and children, and the years of skin-grafts, physical therapy, disfiguration, and unending pain which lay waiting for her like a lion stalking its prey – she would have died of despair. Instead, it appears that the Good Lord spared her by allowing the coma. Now, mercifully, the time had come for her to go in peace, accompanied by her family and long-estranged father.

If someone asked, "Why did the Lord allow this to happen?", I'd reply that the same Lord who allowed the Nazi Holocaust, the firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo, the dropping of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the use of civilian aircraft to bring down the World Trade Towers in searing flames on September 11th, also allows humans, in their freedom, to commit smaller atrocities, whether on purpose or by accident.

Yet even if God doesn't interfere with the human freedom to do what is evil, he does manifest his care, his presence and his mercy, in many ways.

I witnessed firsthand how the brutal accident and its prolonged aftermath brought together a community, helped bring reconciliation to a broken

family, and galvanized people of conscience again in fighting the crime and the substance abuse that have generated so much needless suffering.

Lest there be doubts about the role of substances in the tragedy, the Madera Tribune of July 6, 2006 claimed the suspect “allegedly admitted to consuming four, 40-ounce containers of Cobra Malt Liquor and smoking an unknown amount of methamphetamine” before the accident.

Surely, the loss of five innocent lives should help sensitize substance-abusers. If not, the increased public outrage should make drinking and drug use less attractive and more costly to those who put others at risk.

Of course, none of these benefits justify, or even make less tragic, the heart-wrenching deaths of these five family members. Their photographs remain in the relative’s garage as a testimony to family unity and caring: the boys proudly posing on either side of their sister, Sulema. The young lady standing tall and beautiful beside her parents, shortly after her mass called “Quinceañera”, and Valentine and Celia looking still so youthful.

As I joined the relatives and friends of the Berbers in the relative’s home off Paradise Road in Modesto, just as I had the year before, I had to pay my respects to those five beautiful people in the photographs. Behind the photos stood, as it had a year ago, a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It was she who had said to Juan Diego so long ago, “Hear me and understand well, my son the least, that nothing should frighten or grieve you. Let not your heart be disturbed. Do not fear that sickness, nor any other sickness or anguish. Am I not here, who am your Mother? Are you not under my protection? Am I not your health? Are you not happily within my fold? What else do you wish? Do not grieve nor be disturbed by anything. Do not be afflicted...” (Fourth Apparition, December 1531)

Jesus had said something similar, 1500 years before: “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In my Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” (John 14:1-3)

I believe the Berbers found their way. As Jesus went ahead, to prepare the way for his disciples, so did the four who died immediately in the van. Then, after two weeks of pulling the family together in a vigil of hope,

their mother followed. Their relatives and friends continue to count on the grace of God to move forward with faith. And as for the one who caused this unfathomable tragedy, his bail was set at one million dollars.

I don't know the outcome of his trials, but I know that the court hearings will only be a fraction of the trials he has been facing. My hope and prayer is that he dedicate what life and health he has remaining – since his injuries were relatively minor – to teaching others to avoid his errors.

I draw inspiration from the saint for Friday, July 6th, when this article was written. Maria Goretti was stabbed to death at the age of twelve because she would not submit to rape. Forty-eight years later, as she was being canonized in St. Peter's Square, her parents were there. And beside them, reconciled and forgiven, was the man who took her life. It was 1950. The young man had done his time – not enough, of course, since no time would bring her back or forgive the sin of homicide – and he had begged the pardon of her family. I hope the Madera man has done the same.

He has to live with the vision of the flames and the screaming that he had caused, but he doesn't have to face an eternity of the same fate. May he, and all those who put the lives of others at risk, choose the Lord of life.

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