

Making sense of the senseless: Seeking God in the midst of the Oxford tragedy

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An Oxford High School student listens to a homily at St. Joseph Parish in Lake Orion in the aftermath of a tragic shooting at the school on Nov. 30. Three students were killed, and eight other people were wounded, with three remaining in critical condition early Dec. 1. (Michael Stechschulte | Detroit Catholic)



One of the tragic marks of our modern world is stories of senseless violence. We have seen acts of tremendous violence leave scars on different communities throughout our country, especially when they are done to young people. As men and women of faith, we have responded with our prayers and acts of solidarity and support. When the worst of our human nature is on full display, we often find the strength to be our best.

We mourn with the families whose lives have been ruined by the shooting at Oxford High School. We know that nothing we say or do can take away the pain of losing a child, especially violently at the hands of another young person. It is an unspeakable sadness.

We also mourn with the families who will be forever scarred by what happened on Nov. 30: the students who saw their close-knit school turned into a place of chaos, with kids running for their lives; the faculty and staff who, fearing for their own lives, showed great courage and composure to help so many young people escape; the police and other first responders who put their lives in danger to save countless others. All of these men and women have scars that will last a lifetime.

I know Oxford. I spent two years of my priesthood serving the faithful in Oxford and Lake Orion, sharing their joys and sorrows, watching football games, celebrating graduations, running into neighbors at Meijer — the place that served as the rendezvous point for parents and students after the school was evacuated — and praying with them. Oxford is a community that prays. Along with the other Christian communities, St. Joseph Parish is filled with men and women from Oxford who pray together. They don't just pray on Sunday; they pray at daily Mass, in small groups, and most especially in the Holy Family Perpetual Adoration Chapel in the parish. Around the clock, this community is in prayer.

But prayer can be hard at times like this. It can be tempting to turn away from the Lord in the midst of tragedy. It is normal to ask, "*Where was God? Why didn't he prevent it? How could a good, loving God allow this to happen?*" These are not easy questions, but we should not be afraid to ask them. In times of senseless violence, it is not uncommon to see atheists use these questions to puncture or mock the faith of believers. But we disciples of the crucified Lord cannot be afraid to hear or ask these questions. How can we respond?

Our first response is to remember that the God we profess is a crucified Savior. The cross has become a normalized image for us, but 2,000 years ago, it was a sign of unspeakable violence and cruelty. And it is the cross that God uses to demonstrate His love for us. In the cross, God shows that His love for us is steadfast and constant. On the cross, Jesus poured out every ounce of blood from his body. He took on our human flesh precisely so that he could lay down his life for us. The God we profess was not afraid of suffering and even of death. He knows the sorrow, the pain, and the loneliness that they bring. He knows your sorrow and confusion. He is not afraid of your anger, hurt, fear, or sadness. He wants you to give them to Him.

Our God does not give us a reasoned response to tragedies such as what happened at Oxford High School. There is no reasoned response that would suffice. This violence is a great sin, and sin is not reasonable. So how does He respond? With His love.

He gives us His love that is stronger even than death. He gives us His love not *in spite of* the tragedies of this world, but *precisely because of* these tragedies. Jesus knows the depth of the sadness that comes with our journey through this world and its valley of tears. He gives us a love that is unconquerable; a love that nothing in this world can overcome. No tragedy — however horrific and senseless — is not covered by the love of Jesus Christ. God's response to evil is love. To some, this is not enough. To others, this is weakness. But to those who believe, His love is the only thing worth clinging to in this world.

In Advent, we set our eyes and our hearts on the coming of Jesus. He broke into history two millennia ago as a newborn child in an out-of-the-way town on the outskirts of Jerusalem. But we know that he will come again, in power and majesty, to right all wrongs and to deliver his merciful justice. His love is hidden and mysterious here and now, but it is real. It is more real than the snow on the ground or the computer I am using to type.

Jesus wants us to participate in this love. We are called not simply to receive it for ourselves or to be bystanders of Jesus' love to a hurting community. "*I no longer call you servants but my friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. Love one another as I have loved you.*" He wants you and me to be his hands and feet, his tears and hugs to a suffering community. He shows his love to this world through the members of his Church. It is for this reason that we are called the Body of Christ on earth.

We cannot make sense of the senseless. But we can respond in faith and love: faith in a God who knows our suffering, love for those who are suffering.

Lord Jesus, I trust in you. I trust that somehow, some way, you can bring good from this tragedy and that the horrific violence at Oxford High School can be redeemed by the power of your Cross. Lord Jesus, use me to show your love to hurting community and a broken world. Give me the strength to participate in the love you want to pour out to those in need.

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Counseling services

Catholic Charities of Southeast Michigan has [counseling services available](#) to those who need it in the aftermath of the Oxford High School shooting.