

HEART-TO-HEART

January 2002

A Pastoral Letter from Richard J. Foster



Dear Friends,

The dawn of this century will from now on be remembered by the horrors of September 11 when towers and fortress fell. This has become a hinge event, certainly for U.S. history and perhaps for world history. And for us personally the images of that day will not—and should not—leave us for as long as we live.

It is now time for us to ponder some of the enduring lessons from 9/11/01. In saying this I am raising before us the ancient question of Ezekiel, “How should we then live?” (33:10). What do the shattering events of that single day teach us that should guide our living for the time, however brief or extended, that we have on this earth?

THE UTTER REALITY OF EVIL

The first enduring lesson is **the utter reality of evil**. We live in a good world that frankly has gone bad. This is the divine risk God undertakes so that we may be free moral agents. God has freely chosen to give us the freedom to choose, and the risk is that we may indeed choose evil rather than good. And the tragic story of our evil choices is written across the face of humanity.

What happened on September 11 was evil. No justifications or qualifications or equivocations will do. It was evil, raw evil. And this is true whether we are speaking of the explosive reality of commercial airliners slicing into gigantic buildings and snuffing out the lives of thousands or of the silent reality of thirty-two thousand of the world’s children dying of hunger-related causes on the same day. Both of these evils, and much more, occurred on 9/11/01.

It is important for us to really pay attention to the reality of evil because evil has become such a non-category in our day that modern people try desperately to explain it away by endless rationalizations about nasty genes or abusive parents or unjust structures. And while there is a point to the many underlying causes for evil, we must nevertheless insist that evil happens because people choose to do evil. Period.

And, please, let us not try to sanitize the vicious, heartless destruction of innocent lives and the traumatizing of millions more with religious platitudes and pretended piety. Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda are trying to hijack Islam for their evil purposes in much the same way that Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich sought to hijack Christianity for their evil purposes. And let us be unmistakably clear: the purposes of both were and are evil, genuinely evil. This form of evil arises whenever any group—be it nomads or nations—presents an image of God as one who advocates a future that favors one people over another, a God who does not seek the welfare of all individuals and people groups, nay the whole of his good creation. Dressing evil in religious garb in no way changes its reality. Indeed, the pretense only piles evil upon evil.

In a book to be published next April (*Renovation of the Heart* published by NavPress) Dallas Willard titles one of his chapters “Radical Evil in the Ruined Soul.” It is a telling title. Evil really does

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exist no matter how hard we try to deny it or ignore it or trivialize it or explain it away. I even find it hard to press us on this point so inclined am I to want to think the best of others and give everyone the benefit of the doubt. But Pollyannaish dreams of idealized goodness simply will not do. Evil is real and it is with this reality that we must contend. To use the language of theology, our anthropology must recognize and take with utmost seriousness the reality of human depravity.

Evil finds its point of origin in the human heart. In *The Gulag Archipelago* Alexander Solzhenitsyn observes, “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passed not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts.” It was, for example, deep hatred nurtured in individual hearts for many years that allowed the terrorists to look their victims in the eye, and then use them, even the children, to annihilate thousands more. Such is the power of evil.

Now, Jesus, the Christ, came into our world, lived, died, and rose from the dead in order to face down evil on its own vicious ground, and to establish a way for us to be delivered from evil and ultimately to be embraced by what is Good, by God himself. This is the great hope . . . indeed, the only salvation for our war-torn, evil-soaked world.

THE UTTER VULNERABILITY OF HUMAN LIFE

The second enduring lesson for our living is **the utter vulnerability of human life**. There really is “no hidin’ place down here.” September 11 and subsequent events have seized many with fear, making them feel that the world is out of control and a very dangerous place. And while I empathize with the angst many people feel, I must press on and say to us, “Welcome to the real world.”

The only difference between pre-9/11/01 and post-9/11/01 is that our vulnerability is no longer hidden from us. Most peoples of the world live with this reality from birth to the grave. We have foolishly thought that oceans and wealth and military muscle comprise an invulnerable shield. Among our proudest possessions were both the targets of attack—the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—and the instruments of attack—our sleek transcontinental airliners. They availed us nothing. Worse than nothing.

Now we must face the truth: the largest oceans will not shield us, the greatest buildings will not shield us, the wealthiest balance sheets will not shield us, the mightiest weapons will not shield us.

What September 11 can do, if we will allow it, is to free us from our captivity to all false and idolatrous securities. We can be freed from putting our trust in human accomplishments no matter how impressive they may appear. We can be freed from putting our trust in material things no matter how solid they may appear. We can be freed from putting our trust in the vast wealth generated by world trade no matter how successful it may appear.

THE UTTER SECURITY OF A LIFE HID IN GOD

This leads me to my third and final lesson of enduring value we learn from the events of 9/11/01 which is **the utter security of a life hid in God**. It really is the only safe place to be. Really.

Bill Vaswig, one of our team members, shares in an article his experience at a Trappist monastery at a particularly low point in his life: his wife was dying of uterine cancer, his own health was

compromised, his ministry organization (Preaching and Prayer Ministries) was threatened with financial collapse. He told his spiritual director of the week, Brother Boniface, that he did not know where to stand in the midst of all these difficulties. Wisely Brother Boniface answered, “Stand between Mary and John at the foot of the cross for the rest of your life. If the Lord should grant you favors, thank him. If not, thank him that he is giving them to others who need them more.”

Bill comments, “The place to stand for all of us in these troubled days of September 2001 is at the foot of the cross between Jesus’ mother, Mary, and John his beloved disciple. Perhaps these two figures at the foot of Jesus’ cross summarize our situation today. The cross represents the very worst crime in human history, much worse than what we all have found to be so grossly shocking. The best, wisest, most loving, perfect, brilliant man who ever lived was killed by weak, selfish, ungodly men who thought they were big enough to take on God. And this God-man chose to be killed by them in that way. That, my friends is love—the unbelievable, unfathomable, undeserved, and thought-through love of God. ‘None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would never have crucified the Lord of Glory’ (1 Cor. 2:8).

“Can we imagine the terror in Mary’s heart as she sees her son being killed like a guilty murderer? . . . Now on this horrible afternoon Jesus looks down from the cross to Mary his mother and to his ‘best’ friend John the disciple. He asks John to take care of his mother and his mother to treat John like a son. . . .

“At such a time as this, is there a better place to be than at the foot of the cross with Jesus’ family when he dies? Is there a better place to be at this point in America’s history than with our families, especially our larger family the Holy Christian Church? Mary and John became family at the cross on that Good Friday.”

“Stand between Mary and John at the foot of the cross for the rest of your life,” said Brother Boniface. And so we do, for this truly is the place of utter security.

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SABBATICAL PLANS

By looking at the RENOVARÉ schedule for 2002 some of you may have already surmised that I will not be involved in public ministry from January through August. It is true, for the next eight months I will be on sabbatical, a decision our Board encouraged and approved nearly two years ago. It will be an important time for me and for RENOVARÉ. I have several writing projects for this time.

But even more important, I hope to be still and experience deep rest, even as I consider the next decade or so of ministry direction.

I also hope during this time to cast a vision for RENOVARÉ, especially our role in defining a new ecumenism for the future. It is clear that the old ecumenism that burst onto the religious scene at the dawn of the twentieth century has pretty well run its course, and we badly need a new way of envisioning the people of God.

- We need a vision that calls all God’s people together on the basis of a firm, positive affirmation of the things we have in common rather than a negative listing of our differences.

We need a vision

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- We need a vision that welcomes the rich diversity of the body of Christ while being absolutely clear on the essentials of Christian life and faith.
 - We need a vision that understands the difference between things central and things peripheral and that will not confuse the one for the other.
 - We need a vision that is highly Christocentric—a vision centered in a living faith in the living Christ.
 - We need a vision that does justice to the complexity of the human person in relationship with the infinite-personal God.
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- We need a vision that brings people into such life-transforming realities that they are indeed taken over by love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control, indeed, all the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).
 - We need a vision in which worship and caring and community life become natural and instinctive.
 - We need a vision of justice and shalom that can attack evil in all its multifaceted forms, overcoming it with good.

And so much more. It is to develop such a vision that I will be giving sustained attention during this sabbatical time.

Be assured that during this eight-month period RENOVARÉ will be in full swing. Other team members will be leading our conferences and retreats, writing our *Perspective* newsletters, and overseeing the office. I have full confidence in their ministry skills under the power of God. The office staff will keep things humming smoothly, and they will be caring for all correspondence and orders. I will not be seeing my personal correspondence until September so I really urge you to address any questions or concerns to my associate, Lynda Graybeal. She is fully authorized to respond in my stead.

May the year 2002 find you secure in God, in genuine harmony with family and friends, and empowered to walk cheerfully over the earth.

Peace and joy,



Richard J. Foster