

“THE ETIOLOGY OF EVIL” MAKING SENSE OF THE SENSELESS

In one moment, people of all ages were enjoying a **Country Music Festival** in Las Vegas, headlined by one of the industry’s biggest stars, **Jason Aldean**. Fans described the concert crowd as including parents with kids on their shoulders, singles, couples, even the 50+ crowd. Yet, during the final song at 10:00 p.m., shots began to fire relentlessly from an unknown location. If you saw the video, you know how rapidly they came. I had awoken extremely early on Monday morning, figuring since I could not sleep I might as well get going. When I turned on the television news, the banner on the bottom of the screen indicated that 2 people were killed and 20 wounded. Of course, that was merely the initial report, and the numbers steadily rose. The first sounds audible on the raw footage immediately conjured up an image of a fully automatic army machine gun, as there is no way a finger could pull a trigger so quickly.

The etiology of evil is not a topic about which I consider myself particularly well-versed— can anyone be well-versed enough to explain the surreal, the inconceivable, the horrific nature of this crime? Of course they cannot. Instead, we can only ask ourselves how we ought to continue to live our lives when it seems that no place is off limits for those who choose to do us harm. I do not have an “elevator speech,” a 30-second answer to the problem of evil, but I surely think about it. If you struggle with making sense of evil, you are hardly alone. Catholic philosophers, theologians and saints have struggled for centuries, and there is no single definitive answer, though some explanations are more convincing to me than others.

An early 5th century Roman philosopher and consul by the name of **Boethius** broached this subject in his work, “**The Consolation of Philosophy**.” It is a classic treatise reading like a poem in places, dealing with the interplay between free will and God’s omniscience, His all-knowing nature. He wrote it while in confinement in Pavia, Italy for running afoul of the Eastern Emperor. Blessed Severinus Boethius is buried in the same Church as is St. Augustine in Pavia. He also delves into the nature of evil, trying to understand its allure. He writes: “...for men cannot raise to the transparent light of truth their eyes which have been accustomed to darkness. They are like those birds whose sight is clear at night, but blinded by daylight. So long as they look not upon the true course of nature, but upon their own feelings, they think that the freedom of passion and the impunity of crime are happy things” (Book IV). I interpreted this to mean that for one contemplating an evil act, the evil that they commit appears to be good to them. In their blindness, their objectively evil actions appear good.

Philosophically speaking, this is logical, even as it confounds us. How else is it possible to make sense of the tragedy in Las Vegas? Every agent acts towards an end, meaning that there is purpose involved; the world is not random. There is a goal, an end towards which we strive. **St. Thomas Aquinas** further stated that “every agent acts for a good” (*Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 2-3). It is a basic principle that all action is directed towards a good, **at least as** we perceive it. The bank robber acts for a “good,” insofar as he sees the acquisition of money as in his interest at that moment. The college student drinking to excess believes that it will be fun to let loose after mid-terms, etc. Though both actions are objectively wrong (evil), the agent (person acting) does not or cannot see it that way, given the error of the moment.

Blessed Severinus Boethius carefully pondered the **fleetingness of life**, just how quickly it passes and on the instability of human existence. He wrote: “I see how happiness and misery lie inseparably in the deserts of good and bad men.” He surmised that it was impossible for human beings to comprehend that for the Lord, everything is an eternal present. We ourselves are so bound by time— we only think in terms of time. But God is outside of time. In His plan, the world is ordered by God’s Providence. But that does not prevent chaos. For Boethius, evil dissipates into nothingness. “*In this case, they are not merely powerless but they cease to exist...*” Evil renders power as weakness. Boethius ponders rhetorically: “And what is the health of the soul but virtue? And what the sickness, but vice? And who is the preserver of the good and banisher of the evil, who but God, the guardian and healer of minds?” (Book IV).

The Old Testament **Book of Job** is a powerful meditation on the problem of good and evil, and I might suggest

that now is an opportune time for a re-read of it in your own prayer. Job says: “Will one who argues with the Almighty be corrected? Let him who would instruct God give answer!” (Job 40:2). God responds by telling Job that His wisdom is beyond human comprehension, and that mankind is not in charge. All too true, as we can see, for we have certainly misused our free will in horrific ways at times. Job relents, and ends by ceasing to question the Lord. He concludes: “Who is this who obscures counsel with ignorance? I have spoken but did not understand; things too marvelous for me, which I did not know” (Job 42:3). The wise St. Augustine wrote, “...for You have made us for Yourself, O God, and our heart is restless until it rests in You” [*Confessions* I,1,1]. Indeed, our nation is restless, bitterly divided on many fronts and seemingly incapable of making substantive progress in Washington D.C. If we desire change, let’s start by looking in the mirror and committing to lives of virtue, charity and reconciliation.

- I enjoyed visiting with people out on Summit Ave. and John Ireland Blvd. between Masses for last Sunday’s Twin Cities Marathon. Once again, I did not see the lead runners pass the Cathedral because it is always after the 10:00 a.m. Mass has begun. The bells pealed right on cue as the lead runners passed by, and I have to think that **Pius Dominic Ondoro** heard the bells as he raced to his third straight victory. The 29-year-old Kenyan runner is Catholic after all, and crosses himself at the start of the race.
- Join us this Friday, October 13th beginning with the 5:15 p.m. Mass celebrated by Archbishop Bernard Hebda, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the final apparition of **Our Lady of Fatima**. People are then encouraged to gather at the State Capitol grounds at 6:30 p.m., followed by a 7:00 p.m. Rosary Procession to the Cathedral and **Marian Consecration**. Join us, and spread the word.
- The **WWI America** exhibit at the Minnesota History Center is well worth visiting. My maternal grandfather (born in Paris in 1898) was automatically eligible for citizenship upon enlisting during World War I. Though he remained stateside, he served his country. Over 53,000 Americans were killed in combat in the Great War. Appropriately, it is on display through Veterans Day, November 11.
- Wait till next year! Hope springs eternal! With some powerful bats in the lineup, the future looks bright for the Twins.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector