Terror, Trauma, and Transcendence
Pastoral Ministry after 9/11

C. Kevin Gillespie, S.J.

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have changed not only our personal but also our cultural story. Drawing on psychology, theology, and studies in pastoral counseling, the author persuasively lays out a case for how such traumatic events offer the possibility for human growth and transformation.

From AIDS to SARS, from anthrax to war, and from clerical to corporate abuse, it seems that the twenty-first century has begun with one tribulation after another. Standing most prominently among such crises of the new century is the salient date of September 11, 2001, a date which has helped to give an early definition of the new century as one of terrorism and trauma. It is as if, in the new century, we are moving from one crisis to another, propelling us to seek some sense of order, some sense of cosmos amidst the chaos. How often do we find ourselves comparing the American way of life before and after September 11, 2001?

Traditionally, religious institutions in the United States have had ways of responding systematically to crises, evoking a sense of hope and trust. However, with the crisis of clerical abuse, even these sanctuaries of safety have become suspect. A pandemic of evil has fractured the structures and systems that traditionally have contained these forces bringing despair and destruction. Where

C. Kevin Gillespie, S.J., is associate professor of pastoral counseling, Loyola College in Maryland, and serves as director of Loyola’s M.A. program in Spiritual and Pastoral Care.
then might pastoral ministry find the meanings to respond with hope and healing? This essay seeks to identify pastoral responses that may represent epiphanies of grace amidst the realities of this new century’s episodes of evil. In so doing, it offers a prismatic view of ministry after 9/11. Like Pandora, whose box emitted a host of demons, hope may still emerge.

Certainly before September 11 there was concern about the increasing stress in the many forms of ministry. Just prior to 9/11, William Bausch in *Brave New Church, from Turmoil to Trust* discussed a series of stressors impacting the ministry in the Church. Bausch’s analysis ranged from authority to secularism and from anti-Catholicism to priest shortage. As noted above, recent events have further augmented the stress on ministry.

Initially, the upheavals associated with 9/11 resulted in thousands of people developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) while many others developed the less serious and more temporary condition known as Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). Such stress, unlike PTSD, while intense for a while, dissipates in a matter of days or weeks. PTS was found to be especially prevalent among emergency personnel workers called to assist victims at the sites of the day’s three tragedies. From afar many others experienced vicarious stress and trauma simply by repeatedly watching the videos of the day’s events.

One wonders if the American culture as a whole is not continuing to live with some of the reverberations of such trauma, given the manifold responses of the government’s domestic and international policies. By arresting and holding hundreds of Arabs in America or utilizing high security measures in airports and other centers of public transportation, a “securitization” has occurred throughout the United States on a scale that rivals the security measures of the Second World War. Of course, these policies can be debated, but what is not arguable is the fact that a heightened sense of insecurity has crept into the American consciousness. Not since the Civil War have Americans had to face attacks and casualties happening on our native soil instead of “over there.”

To a certain extent, ministry after 9/11 has been involved in responding to this sense of insecurity that for many Americans, especially those in large cities, lies just below the surface. To become aware of this sense of securitization one has only to look at the fewer Americans who are traveling abroad and at the higher value placed on home security technologies. While making perhaps for a more secure America, such responses to 9/11 have had their consequences in the ways
that Americans perceive and are perceived by the rest of the world. As found by
the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project (2003), peoples in the interna-
tional community from 2002–2003 have developed increasingly negative percep-
tions of American foreign policy and even of Americans in general. Such
perceptions represent a shift from the more sympathetic tone immediately after
the events of September 11, 2001. Through the immediate and subsequent
events surrounding 9/11, Americans have had to seek a new understanding of
their nation’s domestic and international identity. In turn, such a seeking has had
its impact on religious institutions and their pastoral responses to trauma.
Perhaps an overview of the nature of trauma will help to clarify appropriate
pastoral responses.

The Clinical Phenomena of Trauma

Since 9/11 professional organizations such as the American Association of
Pastoral Counselors, the American Psychological Association, and the
American Counseling Association have alerted their members to the need for
training in Disaster Mental Health Services (DMHS) or Critical Incident Stress
Management (CISM). Even before 9/11, however, there was an emerging concern
about the effects of trauma on both victims and the secondary trauma of care-
givers. Increasingly, mental health workers were made aware of the necessity for
crisis intervention training and the impact of secondary stress. Moreover, break-
throughs in clinical research have led to this heightened interest in trauma.

Surprisingly, trauma as a psychiatric phenomenon has been defined only rela-
tively recently by the clinical community. As Judith Herman (1992) has described
so well in her seminal work, Trauma and Recovery, it took the convergence of
several cultural forces to bring into existence in 1980 the psychiatric category of
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Herman explains how in the early 1970s the
mobilization of Vietnam Veterans and the women’s movement came together to
forge the energy for the emergence of PTSD as a formal diagnosis in the third
when therapists observed that women who had been sexually abused or raped
shared some of the same symptoms with veterans returning from Vietnam
combat.

For several decades now a whole literature on trauma has emerged and a host
of organizations and support groups have been formed to combat its symptoms.
In addition, during the 1980s clinical research on PTSD from early childhood
experiences spawned law suits such as those dealing with pedophilia and
ephebophilia. Such clinical data may be seen as resulting in the investigations of
clerical sexual abuse by the courts and throughout the culture at large.
Growth Through Trauma

Just as trauma events have the potential for psychological distress and disorder, they also have the potential for growth. At least these are the findings of recent scholarship in this area. However, some basic personality characteristics and patterns for coping need to be in place for such growth from trauma to happen. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), these characteristics involve such variables as locus of control, self-efficacy, optimism, hardiness, resilience, and a sense of coherence. Growth beyond trauma happens when a person has some sense of control in response to a traumatic event; experiences moments of self-efficacy; exhibits optimism; possesses hardiness through strategies for resisting stress; finds resilience through achievement in life’s ventures despite vulnerabilities stemming from trauma; and is able to develop an overall sense of coherence about life despite the trauma. As their research indicates, people who possess these traits are more likely to overcome the symptoms of trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun (77–86) offer a model comprised of seven principles that describe how psychological growth through trauma may happen.

1. **Growth occurs when schemas are changed by traumatic events.**
   In our psychological development we seek ways to comprehend and understand reality. Trauma forces victims to radically face their own finitude and life’s vulnerabilities and so question the mental maps of cognitive schemas that have developed about their lives. By disrupting schemas growth is possible.

2. **Certain assumptions are more resistant to disconfirmation by any events and therefore reduce possibilities for schema change and growth.**
   If a person’s assumptions about life or spiritual beliefs were shallow prior to a traumatic experience, then growth through trauma may occur by forcing a victim to develop beliefs that serve as a more secure life foundation. If, on the other hand, a person held genuine spiritual beliefs prior to the trauma, then growth occurs through the strengthening of such beliefs. In this respect a trauma has the potential of leading to a greater commitment to one’s core values.

3. **The reconstrual after trauma must include some positive evaluation for growth to occur.**
   Trauma brings about a disruption of the valence between self and the world. As a result, four outcomes can occur: the self and world may both be seen more negatively; the world may be seen more positively and the self negatively; the world is seen more negatively and the self more positively; and the world and the self may be viewed more positively. In the face of trauma, growth happens when a victim is able to move toward the last possibility. A sense of having “the
wisdom to know the difference” expressed in the serenity prayer is characteristic of such growth.

4. Different types of events are likely to produce different types of growth.

While perhaps obvious, this principle points to the significance of the ways in which traumatic events are appraised and their causes attributed. A victim of a natural disaster such as an earthquake or a tornado, i.e., “an act of God,” will appraise the trauma much differently than a victim of a human atrocity such as the events of 9/11.

According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, differences between the emotional effects of natural disasters and those from human atrocities involve different appraisal and attribution processes. While appraising the causes of natural disasters may not lead people to do violence to one another, appraising a human atrocity and attributing blame may lead subsequently to further violence and even war. On the other hand, appraisal and attribution processes may lead an individual or a group to grow through a trauma. Likewise, these processes may also lead to the strengthening of one's belief in Divine Providence.

5. Personality characteristics are related to possibility for growth.

Studies of coping indicate that the pre-trauma developmental experiences and traits of a victim have a lot to do with the severity and longevity of post-trauma symptoms. For Tedeschi and Calhoun these coping traits include a victim's locus of control, hardiness, and an overall sense of optimism. While severe trauma can produce serious symptoms for any victim, the manner by which a person appropriates meaning from traumatic events and the coping resources one possesses has a lot to do with the extent of the symptoms and a victim's capacity to psychologically grow beyond them. Such resources of meaning are illustrated in Victor Frankl's well-known account of his experiences in a concentration camp described in his classic, Man’s Search for Meaning.

6. Growth occurs when the trauma assumes a central place in the life story.

Trauma changes a person's and often a culture's story. Certainly the events of 9/11 have changed the lives of not only the victims, but the cultural narrative of the United States and other nations. Places such as the World Trade Center and The Pentagon became suddenly vulnerable. Airplanes flying low in the sky have engendered new meanings. Many airplane passengers have new anxieties concerning their safety as they patiently endure the hassles involved in passing an obstacle course of security checks. Although some security measures may become commonplace and other measures reduced, the cultural narrative in the United States will never be the same. As previously with December 7, 1941 and
November 22, 1963, the date of September 11, 2001 represents the beginning of a new chapter in the American narrative.

7. *Wisdom is the product of growth.*

Paradox has been shown to be a central constituent in the growth of wisdom. Paradoxes of wisdom include how good can come from bad, or gain despite loss. For the Christian, of course, the central paradox of faith is how life can come from death. For many believers, however, paradox may remain at the conceptual level until a personal crisis or an actual trauma challenges one’s core beliefs and values. In the 9/11 tragedy many victims and their families may never find any positive meaning. On the other hand, perhaps a sense that they are not alone in their suffering may lead victims to find how they are connected not only with others who suffered similar traumatic losses that day, but also with the traumas of others throughout the world and down through the centuries. Indeed, did not the first Christians experience a crisis of faith in the death of their leader? Might not comfort be found in the wisdom that emerged from the tragedy of the Cross? Moreover, how often have Christians been invited to believe that crises may become teachable moments about the incarnation happening in time when *chronos* may become *kairos*?

**Trauma and the Encounter with Evil**

For the believer, trauma as an experience of terror provides ample evidence for the existence of evil. Terror may be experienced from the forces of natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or tornados, or from human atrocities. While the theodicy questions about evil can emerge from natural disasters, it is the trauma from human atrocities that raises the most intense questions and is most relevant for our purpose. The traumas of September 11, 2001 were not from nature, but the result of human atrocities. In ministry, then, how does one come to most effectively reflect upon and speak about the evil of such human atrocities and the suffering of their victims?

It can be safely said that the experiences of evil or the question of suffering have been among the perennial dilemmas of being human. When people suffer, they ask “Why?” and the various responses to the question “Why?” have been among the central concerns of religious communities and their respective traditions. The main traditions of faith have, through the centuries attributed the various causes and consequences of suffering to evil and have developed nuanced responses to evidences of this evil. At times these responses have been the source of conflict between faith and reason, especially since the era of the enlightenment.
The seventeenth-century philosopher Leibniz invented the term “theodicy” as an attempt to defend or justify God for creating a world filled with evil. Leibniz reasoned that, while there are many evils in the world, human beings live in the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz’s philosophical approach spurred further discussions, which can be grouped into three dimensions or types of evil. They are: metaphysical, moral, and physical dimensions. Metaphysical evil represents cosmological actions or movements that suggest evil’s sources and supports. Moral evil consists of those human actions, which go against one’s conscience and bring harm either to others or to oneself. Physical evil involves those circumstances and events in nature that cause people mental or physical hardship, e.g., accidents or natural disasters such as earthquakes and tornados.

Leibniz’s consideration of evil as part of the best of all possible worlds was a rationalist amplification of St. Augustine’s view of evil as a necessary ingredient in life. For Augustine, evil is a precondition for a greater good. Christian believers may be inclined toward Augustine’s formula that evil ultimately allows for a greater good. Then again, such a view might be small comfort to someone who has been traumatized or is being terrorized. In helping a victim of trauma, it seems prudent for the pastoral minister to avoid invoking any arguments from theodicy, if and when the victim asks the question, “Why did God allow this to happen?” Rational arguments about evil, by necessity, appeal to the mind more than the heart and for the victim these arguments may appear to be too removed from the experience. Nevertheless, as an individual, it is worthwhile for the pastoral minister to explore such arguments so as to appropriate and give meaningful responses to evil that incorporate both faith and reason. Indeed, the Christian tradition has a long history of offering integrative responses to evil. Lee Griffith in *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God* (2002) examines such responses, finding prophetic witnesses in the lives of Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, and Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Pastoral theologian Margaret Arms (1997), meanwhile, considers Wendy Farley’s contemporary approach to theodicy as expressed in terms of “radical suffering” caused by human violence. For Farley, such violence robs its victims of the capacity to resist. In this respect, she views redemption as resistance to evil (6–8).
Likewise, Arms considers Elaine Scary’s approach to evil from the standpoint of pain and torture (8). For Scary, evil deconstructs the victim’s world of language and meaning. In response, ministry seeks to resist such deconstruction and help a person either maintain a meaningful language or create one that provides a more comprehensive understanding of the suffering. An example may be seen in the ways that the Jewish community, in the face of the evils done to them by the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi regime, has created new meanings around “holocaust” and thus achieved more comprehensive understandings.

Finally, the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1995) sums up the importance of pastoral responses to evil when it states, “There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil” (Catechism, 92).

For the Christian, therefore, the terror and trauma that Jesus experienced in his passion and death represents the greatest demonstration of God’s being with humanity in the face of evil. Certainly, many of Jesus’ followers, especially those who followed him to his tortuous death, were psychologically traumatized. Within the paradox of the Paschal Mystery, then, are not believers asked to share vicariously in the terror and the trauma of the crisis of Christ? Pastoral ministry, by definition, demands such a participation in God’s response to evil as seen in the trauma of the cross. But it is also the triumph of the cross where hope and healing may be found.

Transcending Trauma

Following any traumatic event, the pastoral minister is usually called upon only after the initial effects of the event have occurred. Since the emergency care given by police and rescue personnel and the medical care of physicians and nurses are usually the first level of care, the pastoral minister is ordinarily called upon to deal with a victim only after the immediate crisis has passed. When called upon in such circumstances, the pastoral minister will need to have a sound sense of conveying a caring and motivated presence of hope and be prepared for the emergence of psychological dynamics within both the victim and oneself. Three studies address some of these dynamics.

From a pastoral counseling perspective, Jeffrey Means (2000) examines the various ways whereby evil attacks the self. He considers trauma’s threat to the bonds of attachment. In this respect, evil may be seen as an attack on healthy attachments. Ministerial responses to evil and its trauma may explore those attachments that provide victims some sense of soothing and hope. Means goes on to suggest that pastoral counseling may serve as a critique of the ways in which a culture cooperates with evil. Such pastoral responses he sees as being within the prophetic tradition (Means, 159–72).
Meanwhile Steven Sanford (1996) explores how pastoral ministers cope and respond to traumatic violence that happens not only to individual parishioners but also to the parish at large. Sanford, in his study of a Christian community’s response to traumatic violence in Jamaica, found three theological motivators to be associated with positive outcomes. According to Sanford, the three theological motivators are: a personal call from God, a sense of a priority of need, and a love for the people (Sanford, 136). By means of his research Sanford demonstrates the importance of considering a pastoral minister’s motivation for such a ministry. We may surmise that when such motivation is not addressed adequately, the pastoral minister becomes more vulnerable to secondary stressors and even burnout.

Finally, Duane Bidwell (2002) conceives of a trauma ministry as “pneumatraumatology” and correlates psychosocial interventions with concepts from systematic theology. Bidwell develops such an approach by presenting narrative/constructive perspectives as well as the biblical insights of Walter Brueggemann. For Bidwell, narrative perspectives of pneumatraumatology help victims to “story themselves into a future life with God in which they have integrated the trauma with their faith” (143). Victims, moreover, are encouraged to ask “questions of difference” such as, “What will be different in their relationship with God as a result of the new knowledge they have gained through the experience of trauma?” (Ibid). Citing Joerg Rieger, Bidwell believes that in the face of trauma the key question to ask is not so much, “How could God allow this evil?,” rather “If this is what evil looks like, where does God enter the picture?” The pneumatraumatologist explores with a victim how God may be revealed and incarnated in a trauma narrative.

**Conclusion**

Terror and trauma are words that have become all too common in contemporary cultures. Born out of the terrible wars and anxieties of the twentieth century, such words, once extraordinary, have now become part of our everyday lexicon. Christianity, through its rituals and institutional structures, has a rich tradition of transcending trauma and its evils. While the recent series of traumatic events and terrorist activities are indications that evil and its effects are alive and well, there are also visible creative and communal pastoral responses. Indeed, a central mission of the Church is to provide meaningful responses to the multifarious expressions of evil. For those engaged in pastoral ministry one of the challenges is to discover and develop pastoral responses to the immediate victims of trauma as well as to the culture at large. Perhaps, as Bidwell suggests, contemporary ministry requires skills reflecting a theology of trauma or pneumatraumatology. In facing the new century, especially since 9/11, it seems that
pastoral ministers need to be prepared to help people believe that despite trauma and terror, there exists a God who underwent trauma so that human beings may transcend such evil and be transformed in healing and with hope.

References


