

**CHURCH CHAT
BY**

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'TIS NOT THE SEASON

Here we are right in the middle of the Christmas/New Year/Hanukah/Kwanza/ Holiday/Winter Celebration season (that may or may not cover everyone). How's it going?

The Newtown, CT tragedy colors everything regardless of your religious affiliation or non-affiliation. As a Catholic, I was proud of the local pastor who offered the compassion of Jesus, a consoling community, and a practical faith in the midst of the unthinkable.

Our pastor had a similar message and tried to connect the joy of Bethlehem and Advent with the reality of Newtown, and he did a good job. As good as might be expected. But on an emotional level, the sadness, deep frustration, anger, and speechless sorrow are winning out over the anticipated happiness, focused faith, and reinforced hope in the beauty of humanity made visible in the Baby Jesus. I doubt if we have enough time between now and December 25 to drown out the Newtown massacre with three verses of "Joy to the World."

My faith says that the birth of Jesus trumps all evil, including the killing of innocents (both children and adults) in Connecticut. But my mind and my heart needs more time to catch up with my faith.

I can't add much to what you have already heard and read. I hope your pastor addressed this tragedy well. If not, tell him he negated his ministry, and you will now go to a different parish where at least someone tried to deal with this horror sensibly and compassionately. Not mentioning it or saying something inappropriate is grounds for switching parishes immediately.

Some of us criticize the institutional Church regularly. But the killing field in Sandy Hook elementary school reveals the comforting presence of the local Church where compassion, empathy, soothing ritual, and shared sorrow offer arms of support to devastated parents and stricken families.

Because of our family experience (our daughter, Karla, had bipolar disorder and died by suicide) and our work with the Karla Smith Foundation (www.KarlaSmithFoundation.org), my reaction to events like Sandy Hook quickly goes to the mental health component. If you have not yet seen this article in the Huffington Post describing an Adam Lanza-like situation, I encourage you to read it: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/16/i-am-adam-lanzas-mother-mental-illness-conversation_n_2311009.html.

The continuing horror of mass killings screams for help and demands greater protection for future victims. Where is the societal Kevlar vest defending us from the attacks of untreated or poorly treated people with mental health problems? One side of that vest must be greater funding for research, more mental health professionals, enlightened family members, and a society comfortable with speaking about and coping with mental illness. Mental illness is manageable but it takes all of us to manage it.

The evidence from Newtown is still being gathered and there are thousands of experts analyzing each shred and thousands more media professionals reporting the story every day. Some conclusions will come later. I can't help but think that Adam Lanza was determined to kill himself and, in his twisted mind, wanted to take as many innocent people with him as possible, as innocent and as many as he could find. Sandy Hook then became his perfect target. He went there to die but not before he fulfilled his ghastly and tormented plan.

I may be wrong but this theory, at this time, is my best guess. I have to guess because, like millions of people, I keep asking "why?"

Ultimately, there may be no truly satisfying answer to "why". An unanswerable question. This is where and when a local faith community, in our case, a Catholic parish, can offer its most valuable resource. There we should find a compassionate, comforting pastor leading a caring community of believers who surround victims and their families with the tangible insistence that God remains close, loving, understanding, and supportive.

The Church is not about providing answers as much as providing comfort and hope when there are no answers.

If a parish can't do that, then what good is it? And that goes for all parishes, not just St. Rose of Lima in Newtown, CT. Terrifying events like this affect all of us deeply, not just the immediate victims.

This year's Christmas season is shadowed by the cruel, cold cloud of the massacre in Connecticut. Jesus, too, was born into a deeply flawed world. Somewhere, somehow there is a connection between his harsh world and our harsh world. And his peace and our peace.

Sometimes those connections are hard to live. May you be so connected this season.