

Column

What, if anything, have we learned from 911? I am thinking not so much about preventative strategy – how to keep guns, knives and Muslim terrorists off airplanes -- but spiritually.

On that fateful day, a day that will live in infamy no less than Dec. 7, 1941, I was in my church study. The telephone rang. It was from a parishioner whose neighbour had just called to say that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. She had no television, and said with some force: Find out what is going on.

There was no television in the church, but there was in my office a console radio circa 1940. So, my secretary and I turned it on. Reception was limited, but we found one local station with a strong signal. The Ludlow Porch show was on. Porch, a Southern humourist and step-brother of funny man Lewis Grizzard, didn't know any more about the situation than we did, but he was full of prayers and exhortations.

Finally, the station switched to a national news feed and information began to come in; none of it good. About the same time, the telephone began to ring. The calls were from people in the community who wanted to know if the church was open for prayer (which it was) and whether there was to be any service that day. Quickly, a noonday prayer service was organized. People showed up. These services continued all week.

A week or so later, I flew to New York. Arriving at Atlanta's Hartsfield airport for my departing flight to Newark, I discovered an America I had never seen before: soldiers with machine guns patrolling the area near the check-in counter.

In the departure lounge, I sat down near a group of business men. One, a black man, seeing my clerical collar, asked if I was going to be on their flight. When I said I was, he responded, "Oh good, I was praying for someone like you. I feel much safer." He then proceeded to offer me some of his lunch. As it turned out, we were seatmates
. . . how could anyone not believe in providence!

The next day in the city, pictures of people missing were posted everywhere. Churches were filled. I wandered into one, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where a service remembering employees of the Windows of the World (a restaurant atop the North Tower) was in progress. I was handed a candle and stood in solidarity with people with tears running down their faces.

Events that took place on Sept. 11, 2001, had a profound effect on people. Momentarily, at least, people turned away from the daily scurry of commerce and pleasure, to consider ultimate matters. People reached out to one another. People looked up to God for answers and strength. Church attendance surged.

It would not be long, though, before most everyone returned to business as usual. Did we learn anything? I wonder.

Eighteen years have passed. Moral and spiritual waywardness, self-centeredness and discord, briefly paused at the time of 911, have rebounded with a vengeance. So much so, that the collapse of more than an iconic building now seems imminent. Western Christian civilization itself hangs on a slender thread. What might God's message be to a post-911 generation?

Just perhaps the same as His message to His people of old time: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

May all who love this country remember, learn, pray and act.

O LORD our Governor, whose glory is in all the world; We commend this nation to thy merciful care, that being guided by thy Providence, we may dwell secure in thy peace. Grant to the President of the United States, and to all in Authority, wisdom and strength to know and to do thy will. Fill them with the love of truth and righteousness; and make them ever mindful of their calling to serve this people in thy fear; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

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