

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I spoke with four reporters last week about the burglary in our church. Someone climbed on the air conditioner in the north parking lot, broke a stained glass window, stole the sound system, and exited through another window, all under a motion detector that never triggered the alarm. When I posted the news on Facebook last week, the reaction from our members was strong. People asked why someone would enter a house of God and steal things dedicated for a spiritual purpose. No one was injured, but everyone was offended. We have already received contributions to help us improve security. Our window has been repaired. A perfect stranger donated a sound system.

A break-in does not define the character of this parish or this community. People here care for one another and take pride in their neighborhood. We've improved our streets and homes, and we appreciate the joy of life.

Other people have suffered far worse this week. Gang warfare in Mexico claimed the lives of two young men with families here in the northeast. Bloodshed in other countries brings many immigrants and refugees to our neighborhood, where they hope to find and build a better life. Crimes that destroy art, steal property, and take human lives disrespect our values of humanity and holiness. Some young people die by violence because they could not escape an addiction to illicit drugs. We grieve not just how they died, but why.

An 84-year old priest celebrating a daily mass in Rouen, France, last month looked up to see two 19-year old Islamist terrorists enter his church. They slit his throat, and then police killed the attackers. Muslims all over France attended Catholic mass that Sunday to show their grief and compassion. Some people die from violence because they live inside a world of crime; others because the world of crime they've avoided finds them.

The Letter to the Hebrews was written to help Christians suffering for their faith by having them reflect on the example of other Christians and of Jesus himself. Today's second reading says, "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus.... Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners." Then it reminds them: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood." Like many of us, the people who first received this letter were aware of anti-Christian violence, but their own struggles had more to do with personal sins that kept them from ordinary love of neighbor.

The Kansas City Royals have brought back a pitcher who had been a dominant closer for the team a few years ago, Joaquim Soria. When he first joined the club, he was so good at getting batters out, that the media started to call him the Mexicutioner. He asked them to stop using that nickname. There were too many Mexicans losing their lives through drug violence, and he did not want young people to think that violence should be admired.

We don't either. We will improve our security, and we will keep those who aim to harm us in our prayers. We will redouble our efforts to live without sin. For when we keep our eyes fixed on Christ, we will build a world of charity and peace.