

An anti-religious world



The news bulletin hit me. An arsonist had attacked the great Church of St. Sulpice in Paris.

A few years ago, Our Sunday Visitor sent me to Paris on business, and while there I made the great Church of St. Sulpice my liturgical headquarters. I felt a bond with it as the community of priests that educated me in seminary had its beginnings at this church.

St. Sulpice was, and still is, very much in operation. Masses are scheduled throughout the day. The musical program is among the best in Europe, and that says something. It was heartwarming just to see the number of ordinary people in Paris who stopped throughout the day for a moment of prayer, to say the Rosary before the tabernacle or to go to confession.

I was in the church every day during my visit.

Thankfully, the fire set by the arsonist was contained and the damage was minimal. The news, however, also noted that a series of French Catholic churches had been vandalized or otherwise attacked recently.

Then I thought of similar outrages in this country and elsewhere, such as the 2015 massacre at the historic African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina, and the slaughter of innocent worshippers at the Pittsburgh synagogue last year. Just weeks ago, a gunman ended the lives of 50 people at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.

A French priest in Normandy was killed while he was

celebrating Mass just a few years ago.

I noticed that the Vatican has issued a postage stamp to commemorate an Italian priest who was assassinated not that long ago. Another Italian priest, who also was murdered while at the altar rather recently, has been suggested for canonization.

In late March, a priest in Montreal was attacked and seriously injured while he was saying Mass before television cameras.

Please, dear Lord, prove me wrong, but I fear we have not seen the end of these horrifying events.

Two factors are infesting our world, especially in Western society. In this respect, little separates the United States from France and New Zealand.

The first infection is the increasing feeling against any and all religion. Every religion is at risk, and this phenomenon should not be unexpected. The cultural drift has been to regard religion as private, and the more private the better.

With this comes a disinterest in, and then rejection of, institutional religion. The data thunders at us. Organized religious denominations are declining in numbers. Experts say that the Catholic Church in this country is doing better simply because Hispanic immigrants are arriving, and they add to the Catholic totals. Good for us. However, the slippage among Catholic young adults is terrifying. I shudder to think what this country will see in 50 or 75 years.

Second, divisiveness and suspicion not only are with and in us, but they are gaining strength. Catholic Americans especially should find this development revolting, because Catholics so often have been the targets of mistrust and exclusion in the United States.

And in case we Catholics blind ourselves to the facts, at best

many Americans today merely tolerate us, just as others are tolerated and actually resented.

Terrorism, evidenced in the violence brought upon places of worship, believers and clergy, is one thing. But look at all the hard-heartedness more and more displayed in speech about others, especially the powerless and "unimportant" among us. Unless things improve, our youth will reap the whirlwind.

What to do? Convince others that life can be beautiful and religion and Church make it so.

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