

Filled with Sadness, Charged with Hope: A Joint Reflection on the Events of September 11th

By the National Council of Synagogues and the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

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The events of September 11 fill us with sadness. We mourn the tragic loss of innocent lives. We join in prayer for those who died and extend our collective support for those they leave behind. We are strengthened by the many heroic individuals who have reached out to save lives and selflessly offer comfort and solace.

As people of faith we are reminded anew of the fragility of human life and of the terrible harm that can be caused when people turn our God-given talents to wicked and perverse ends. As leaders of religious communities we are reminded, as well, that even religious faith and piety can be twisted to destructive ends when fanatics pervert religious teachings and invoke them to justify barbaric acts.

No act of terrorism, which by definition targets civilians precisely because they are innocent, can be justified. Even a just end cannot justify evil means. Basic to the moral norms governing the use of force is the immunity of civilians. Every human life is precious whether they be civilians working in the World Trade Center or eating in a restaurant in Israel. Terrorism intentionally directed against civilian populations, no matter what the cause, is always unjustifiable.

We note with sorrow that some have seized on these events to suggest the futility of interreligious conversations. We, on the contrary, see in recent events a reminder of the urgency of dialogue in order to foster mutual understanding and respect.

In the face of this massive tragedy, we are encouraged by Muslim communities around the world which have condemned the terrorism and reclaimed their tradition from the extremists who attempted to take it hostage. We applaud their denunciation of terrorist action against innocents everywhere. Our prayers and support are with them.

We are concerned about acts of prejudice directed against Muslim and Arab members of our society. We condemn them and call on all of our fellow citizens not to let our shared grief lead us to act in ways that dishonor the greatness of heart that has caused America to be a beacon to all the world. We applaud those, beginning with President Bush, who have spoken clearly about the need to reject all prejudice and discrimination in viewing our fellow citizens.

We are equally concerned with what appears to be an alarming escalation in anti-Jewish rhetoric from some who have adopted the libelous language against Jews used by antisemites over the centuries. Such scurrilous attacks on a religious tradition and community have no place in civilized discourse.

Often in the intensity of grief and rage, nations take actions that they later regret. As we enter our battle against the forces of terror, we raise the caution that a general expansion of law

enforcement powers beyond those necessary to fight terrorism cannot be justified if such an expansion comes at the expense of core civil liberties principles of privacy, due process, and freedom of association. Such a Faustian bargain compromises the very idea of freedom, the idea which our adversaries have attacked, and which we are pledged to defend.

Now our nation finds itself in conflict with the forces of terrorism and hatred. We come from traditions that recognize the necessity of a conflict such as this one that is fought in self-defense and to protect innocent lives. Nevertheless, we are reminded that our traditions of just war do not give permission for limitless violence. Instead, they demand that even just wars be fought with concern for the lives of innocents and for the safety and wellbeing of noncombatants and their property. We call on our government to be guided by these constraints as it prosecutes the battle in which we are now engaged.

Our prayers are joined for the safety and success of the men and women of our nation who fight this war on behalf of the security of our land and its people. We pray that the triumph over forces of hatred and destruction will be swift and complete. And we pray for the security innocents everywhere whose lands are now engulfed in violence and peril. May the day come soon when they --and all the men, women and children of our planet --will be able to "sit under our vines and under our fig trees with none to make us afraid." [Micah 4:4]