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Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Give every kiss as if it could be your last

IT is hard to know whether the whole thing was premeditated. He looked unsuspecting, a normal young man simply attending church. Yet, behind the ordinary veneer was something more sinister.

Before arriving at Mass, we had been listening to more shocking details from the shootings at the University of Santa Barbara in California.

Seven people were dead, including 22-year-old killer Elliot Rodger. When news of the massacre broke on Friday, I immediately thought of my aunt and her family who live quite near the university campus.

I myself had visited the university in the early-Nineties. Like all Californian colleges, Santa Barbara was sun-soaked and relaxed. Now, however, it was the site of unimaginable horror.

Confronted with such horror, I often invoke that great prayer: 'There but for the grace of God go I.'

Looking at photos of those poor students slain in cold blood, it is hard to think of a more terrible fate for them and their grieving families. What began as a normal day ended in such misery, mayhem and mourning.

In the face of disaster, we are all 'siblings of the same dark night'. A wrong turn, a slight delay, a rash decision and you could easily find yourself caught up in a deadly drama.

In the midst of his killing spree, Elliot Rodger mowed down two cyclists.

Neither was an intended victim yet their names will hereafter be synonymous with that dreadful day.

The extraordinary children's choir Piccolo Lasso was singing the Missa Pueri Cantores by German composer Wolfram Menschick. Distribution of Holy Communion was just concluding. My son was assisting one of the priests halfway down the church.

In that sublime setting, where the mind of man is on that of God, a young man dressed in jeans and a black shirt made a beeline for the altar. He could not have chosen a better moment as the Congregation was deep in prayer.

One person who was alert was head altar boy Andrew Murphy, who, as it happens, is the gifted captain of the Blackrock College rugby team.

Sitting only feet from the unfolding drama, I froze when the young man aimed his two hands at the priest. Did he have a weapon? If he did, we were in trouble.

In that instant, my thoughts raced to my little son. Thankfully, he was not yet back on the altar. However, I knew what was happening would profoundly affect him.

Without hesitation, Andrew Murphy moved like lightning to prevent the

intruder getting near the celebrant. As if possessed, the man threw out his arms and screamed: 'Get back, get back!' Not even the glorious Piccolo Lasso could drown out his roars.

Thankfully, there seemed to be no weapon. Andrew wrestled him off the altar, the young man's guttural howls becoming increasingly demented. A member of the Congregation grabbed the man and forcibly dragged him screaming through the church. Just as they ejected the troubled would-be assailant, my son returned to the altar. I could see he was deeply perturbed. A side-glance in my direction revealed little eyes swollen with tears.

The blessing, the recessional hymn and all was calm again. Or was it? As I sat waiting for my son to emerge from the sacristy, I knew we had all been very lucky. I knew things could have turned out much worse than they did.

Thanks to Andrew Murphy, and some courageous members of the Congregation, no one was seriously hurt.

Still, experiencing something like that in a place of worship and peace is bound to impact emotionally. For one little boy, it was all too much.

'Did he have a gun? What if the priest had been killed? What if you had been killed?'

As he asked these questions through his tears, I could think of only one thing to say: 'There but for the grace of God go we.' Inside, however, I was asking a question of my own: 'What if you, my little darling, had been hurt?'

IJUST want to go home now,' he said at the door of the sacristy. As we drove in silence, I was once again struck by the sheer fragility of human life. Like those tragic students in Santa Barbara, we are all vulnerable to the unexpected, all susceptible to those unforeseen events whose terrible consequences are barely comprehensible.

My son is still haunted by that man's screams, by the thought of what could have happened if he'd had a gun or even a knife. He cannot understand how anyone could do such a thing in a church of all places. How to tell him that such is life? How to tell him that, sometimes, things happen without any 'why'?

If there is a lesson in all of this, it is surely that while we cannot predict the unpredictable, we can make allowances for it. We can, for example, consecrate each departure with a loving embrace. We can kiss and hug our children at the school gate, despite their eagerness to save face in front of their friends.

For we cannot know if those kisses will be our last, which is why we should lovingly give them as if they were.

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