

Today's Martyrs – Fr. Jacques Hamel

The French Norman city of Rouen is most famous as the location of the trial and execution of Joan of Arc. Joan was the 19 year old peasant woman who under divine influence created modern French nationalism; she was then captured by allies of the English and illegally convicted on a charge of cross-dressing. She was burned at the stake on May 30, 1481.



Six miles away and 535 years later in the village-turned-suburb of Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray an elderly priest was celebrating morning Mass with three nuns and two parishioners. Fr. Jacques Hamel was later described as a “simple” priest, one who performed his ministry without bringing attention to himself. For decades he had lived simply with few possessions and frequent fasting. Everyone liked him, including the local imam who served with Fr. Jacques on an interfaith committee. Fr. Jacques was 85 years of age and so had been ‘retired’ for 10 years; he was present at this July 26, 2016 Mass only because he was substituting for the pastor, who was away on vacation.

Two 19 year old men entered the church. They carried knives, a revolver, and what appeared to be explosives. They forced the six Christians together near the altar. The only laywoman, 86 year old Jeanine Coponet, had the revolver pressed to her neck; her husband Guy was handed a video device and told to start recording.

The assailants tried to force Fr. Jacques to his knees. He resisted, either because Catholic norms state that kneeling signifies only awe before God or because he knew what was going to happen. He then spoke words as an expression of faith and hope: “Go away Satan”. But Satan did not go away. Perhaps Satan had stopped at the door to watch his two young acolytes from afar as they followed his desires – we shall never know this side of heaven the full details of this spiritual battle. They forced the priest down and began to behead him while chanting Islamic prayers. He tried to kick them away and finally whispered one last time “Go away Satan”.

The other Christians were yelling "stop you don't know what you're doing!". Sr. Danielle ran for the door. She waved down a motorist who called the police. The killers then stabbed another nun and slashed 87 year old Guy Coponet four times in the arm, back, and neck; he fell and pretended to be dead. They then attempted to leave the church but were immediately shot dead by police snipers. The unidentified nun was hospitalized in critical condition, and Guy Coponet was hospitalized in serious condition.

It quickly became known that the two killers had posted videos online in which they swore allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIL); presumably their beheading video would have also been posted as another sample of

jihadist pornography. The Islamic State responded by thanking the perpetrators and called for similar attacks in Britain. People around the globe were horrified, though it is hard to see why: attacks like this are fairly common events in many places. Expression of surprise and shock as to the location of the crime serves merely as a demonstration of how parochial and insular people in the West have become in recent decades.

The Archbishop of Rouen, Fr. Jacques' superior, flew home from a youth pilgrimage in Krakow, Poland to minister to his people. The funeral was held in Rouen Cathedral on August 2; among the thousands in attendance were many Muslims, most of whom were members of the widely persecuted Ahmadiyya faith. However, neither the President nor the Prime Minister attended, perhaps because they had been booed at other recent commemorations for the victims of jihadi terror. Also, there were no marches in support of the Church, and no speeches that said "We are all Catholics now". Christianity was definitely given a second class status by French society compared to previous secular victims.

Why does evil exist? Why does a good loving God allow evil? This is the subject of theodicy, an academic area that likely will never have a conclusion. Perhaps, though, one of the 'standard' answers, the idea that God allows evil because a good might come in reaction, might apply in this case. There were about 2 million people in attendance at the youth pilgrimage in Krakow - many the same age as the perpetrators - and news of the death of Fr. Jacques electrified many of the pilgrims the moment it arrived. It suddenly became apparent that the cost of discipleship was real in a way that homilies, academic presentations, and discussion groups could not by themselves show. It cannot be doubted that some grace for the Church will be gained by the timing of the death of Fr. Jacques Hamel. Perhaps some young men and women will be inspired to follow in his footsteps of his life of service – or in the footsteps of Joan of Arc.

Then again, there might be a simpler answer: evil exists just to be opposed. Fr. Jacques resisted to his last breath and to the best of his elderly abilities. He knew his resistance would likely make no earthly difference, and he did it anyway. This should be an inspiration to all of us who have greater abilities to resist evil in all its manifestations, and who know that we stand a better chance of making a difference. Resist! "Go away, Satan". In the name of Jesus, go away.

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