

Today is a sad day of remembrance. We mourn the loss of all who lost their lives and died in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The devilish plot to destroy the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC was pure evil. As tragic and as enduringly painful as the loss of life is, we also find hope in those who responded with sacrifice and service on that day and in the intervening two decades. “Where sin abounds, grace overflows all the more” (Rom 5:20).

On 9/11, F-16 jets scrambled to intercept Flight 93 as it veered off course hoping to strike a third site. The passengers on Flight 93 fought back against the terrorists and drove the plane into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. They sacrificed their lives in order to prevent a greater loss of life. Amidst the trauma and horror of that day, we find hope in their resistance to evil through their ultimate sacrifice.ⁱ

“A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit” (Lk 6:43-44a). Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Not everyone accepts God’s grace. The foolish consequence of knowingly embracing a grave moral evil is eternal damnation. Where there is no remorse or repentance, those who commit grave mortal sins will suffer for all eternity.

Saint Paul shows us another way. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost” (1 Tim 1:15). Paul sees himself as a great sinner and in the Acts of the Apostles, he was personally reprimanded by Jesus. “A light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 9:3-4). Convicted and found guilty, he humbly accepted this rebuke for persecuting Christ by persecuting Christians.

Conversely, we honor Saint Paul as the great Apostle to the Gentiles. The foremost sinner became the greatest of saints. Heartfelt conversion and repentance, makes all the difference. Great sinners show themselves to be great saints by asking for forgiveness and then following the way of Christ.

Many called Mother Teresa of Calcutta a saint in her lifetime. She reached out to the poorest of the poor and loved them unconditionally. She saw Jesus in the suffering and responded despite overwhelming obstacles. Mother Teresa, like Saint Paul, saw herself as a great sinner. This is one reason she went to confession every eight days. The closer you are to the Lord in a life of sacrificial service to others, the more you recognize the need to embrace God’s healing mercy for the strength to serve him. “Who is like the LORD our God, enthroned on high? ... He raises the needy from the dust, lifts the poor from the ash heap” (Ps 113:5,7).

ⁱ CBS News 9-9-21, Fighter pilots recall mission to take down Flight 93 on 9/1