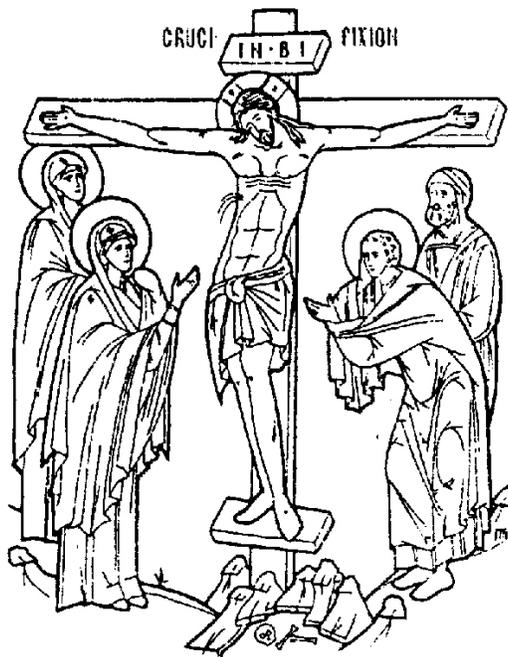


# Resource Packet for Youth and Young Adult Ministry: Responding to Public Tragedies and Violence



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April 20, 2013  
Venerable Theodore of Constantinople

Dear Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters,

In the wake of the recent public violence and tragedies centered in and around Boston, we humbly provide this resource packet. In the following pages you will find three reflections and two “how-to” articles. It is our hope and prayer that you will find these resources helpful and that they will encourage you to engage your youth and young adults on these topics.

We offer these resources freely and gladly to anyone who wants to use them or share them. We encourage all of you to join us in praying for the “peace from above” for our country during this difficult time.

In Christ,

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## **“The Light of Christ Illumines All”**

### **Responding to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing and Its Aftermath**

By Father Philip Tolbert

The venerable Boston Marathon, first run in 1897 and as an annual event ever since, was disrupted this year by the explosion of two bombs, placed near Copley Square, approximately two hours after the winners crossed the finish line. At least three people were killed, and over 175 people were injured by the blasts.

These are the facts, but they explain so little. The individuals responsible are being tracked down even as we write, but their motives are as yet unclear to us. Who are they? Why did they do such unthinkable things? What do they hope to gain by it? And deeper in our hearts arise even harder questions: Why do innocent people have to suffer and die? What are we to do about such things, and how are we to live in such a fearsome world? So many questions we don't know how to answer. So many things we don't understand. Where can we find light to guide us through such dark times?

Consider what we know. We know that while events like this may make us feel alone and afraid, we are not alone in the darkness. There is a light that shines in the darkness, which the darkness cannot overcome (cf. John 1:5). The Apostle John testifies from his own experience that Christ is “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world” and that, “as many as received Him, to them He gave the power to become children of God.” (John 1:9, 12) Yes, there is darkness in this world, but together in our churches, with the Prophet King David we exclaim: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom then shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1)

Why then are we afraid and why are we shaken by these events? The problem is, as this same Apostle says, “light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (John 3:19-21)

Where do we stand in this struggle between light and darkness? Our feelings of anger, guilt, fear, even shame in the face of such events tell us that we are somehow responsible, that we are tainted by the violence and hate around us. What are we to do? At this time of year, we Orthodox Christians are engaged in a great effort, individually and collectively, to repent of those times when we have chosen darkness rather than light, and to ask the merciful Lord to enlighten those places in us where darkness still reigns. At the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified we hear the priest proclaim, “The Light of Christ illumines all!” We are taught to bow before the Lord and to pray that He will have mercy on us all and grant healing and forgiveness to all. If we are sincere in these prayers, we must also act upon them. We must choose to live in the Light of Christ and to engage in acts of kindness. We must become witnesses to the Light by our deeds.

Long ago the Lord Jesus said to His disciples, “In the world you will have tribulations; but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world.” These words are still true and they are meant for us, also. By the tragedy of His death upon the cross, Christ overcame the evil of this world; He broke the power of that evil and removed its effects for us, “trampling down death by death.” He will overcome this latest manifestation of evil and darkness, too.

Perhaps that is all we need to know.

## **10 Do's and Don't's of Talking to our Youth about Acts of Public Violence**

By Mr. Andrew Boyd

### **1. Don't Tell Them Everything is Ok**

If you are reading this article, chances are things are not “ok”. We often have an impulse to reassure our Youth, but insisting that “Everything will be ok” apart from being not necessarily true, is usually a way to make us, the adult, feel better. Stock phrases and pious platitudes often shut down conversation and railroad emotions. It's an easy answer to difficult questions and uncomfortable realities. Instead, direct the attention back on the youth you are ministering to. Ask them how they are feeling, how they are doing, what they are struggling with and focus on listening to them instead of providing stock answers.

### **2. Don't Preach Blame**

In times of irrational violence we all seek the stability of rationalization, namely in finding someone to blame. Our twenty-four hour cable news cycle will obsess in the endeavor, speculating as to which radical group, which political wing-nuts, which religious zealots, deserve the blame. From a Christian perspective, we all deserve the blame. Our separation from God, our willful disregard of His commandments creates this world of violence and patterns of suffering that we all live with everyday. Instead of dwelling on and giving air to the hate that violent groups and individuals are motivated by, focus instead on the positive response of Christians to such tragedies (aid, prayers, healing) and the opportunity that such tragedies give for all of us to witness our faith by loving our neighbor, even those who hate us.

### **3. Don't Do This Ad Hoc**

Don't ambush your youth group or Church School class with an impromptu discussion of a violent tragedy. Instead, give notice that this is your intended topic. Plan your discussion points if possible and plan to include periods in the discussion for your youth to share their thoughts and feelings. Try before hand to articulate your own response to the events and your emotional response to the images and stories from the tragedy.

### **4. Don't Have All the Answers**

You do not have all the answers and pretending to is dangerous in any situation, but particularly in speaking about violent tragedies. Try to start your discussion with “I think” and “I feel” instead of stock dogmatic phrases like “The Church teaches...”. Try turning questions back to the youth when possible. For example, if a young adult says “What kind of God would allow *this*?” try responding with a question to the whole group “Why would the God we believe in allow this?” Guiding our youth towards the right answer is often a more effective means of teaching than merely didactic lectures.

### **5. Don't Get in Over Your Head**

Ask for help if you need it. If you are a lay person, reach out to your priest, if you are a member of the clergy, reach out to a mental health professional or brother clergy. Likewise, if you think that someone in your care needs additional support, do not hesitate

to refer them to clergy or to mental health professionals. Humbly helping is sometimes the best way to be a hero.

### **6. Do Communicate**

In the days following a violent tragedy, communicate with your youth as much as possible. Share what IOCC and other Assembly of Bishops organizations are doing to respond. Share what our bishops are saying. Point out where Christians are stepping up to help people. Share what the needs people might have who were directly impacted by the tragedy. Encourage them to help. Let them know that you plan on discussing this with them at upcoming youth events or meeting. After a crisis, these regular communications are a great way to let your youth know that the Church is responding, and that you are there for them (without having to come out and say it).

### **7. Do Make Space to Listen**

Let your youth know that you and other clergy or lay leaders are available to listen to them, and then do it! Listen to them without judgment. Don't jump down their throats if they express anger or doubt or loss of faith. Feel comfortable being with them in their confusion and uncertainty instead of trying to "fix" their problems. Share your own anxieties and emotions if appropriate to let them know that it's permissible to have them.

### **8. Do Pray Together**

Apart from encouraging them to attend Church, and to pray privately, pray together as a youth group, OCF chapter, or Church School class. Ask your youth what they would like to pray for, or simply prayer The Jesus Prayer so that Christ might have mercy on us all. Model prayer while you are together so that your youth will do it when they are at home.

### **9. Do Care for Yourself**

Be aware of how these events are affecting you. Make sure you are receiving proper spiritual guidance, and have a trusted person to confide in. Model healthy behaviors for your youth instead of exempting yourself from those same behaviors.

### **10. Do Preach the Gospel**

Lastly, these kinds of crisis, after the dust has settled, can provide great teachable moments to preach the Gospel of the Crucified Christ. We are the only faith that believes in a God who takes on human suffering Himself in order to open up a path towards eternal life and freedom from suffering. This is a powerful message. Our answer to these traumatic events is that Cross, that One who came to suffer "on behalf of all and for all." That because of His suffering, all suffering now has meaning as a means for us to attain to Life Eternal in His Kingdom.

## **Why? A Reflection in Response to the Attacks in Houston and Boston 2013**

By Natalie Kapeluck Nixon

*WHY?.....why?.....Why?.....Why would someone want to do something like this? Why were those people hurt and killed? .....Why?....Why can't I stop thinking about it?.....Why does such hatred exist?.....why?.....Why did God let this happen?*

“Why?” is a question that we frequently cannot answer. It is a question we pose to ourselves, to our parents, to our friends and most often to God. In the last week we have experienced as a nation yet additional reasons to ask, “Why?”; after witnessing the stabbings at Lone Star College in Houston and the shocking bombing attack in Boston. “Why” is a powerful word. It can contain in those three letters all of the emotions of anger, disbelief, sadness, confusion, and a broken heart.

“*Why?*” In times like these, when images of such hatred and violence are imprinted in our minds and on our hearts we are left with only the desire to know “why?”. The answer to “why” is not easy. When we are hurting and confused sometimes any answer to “why?” just doesn’t cut it.

So firstly, to begin to understand “why”, we need to open our bruised spirit to God to be soothed. Allow ourselves to cry in silence for the many things that are wrong with our world. Mourn that our world is fallen and broken. Lament that evil reigns here. Grieve that it is humanity that chooses hatred and evil actions over the light of Christ. Cry for those who have suffered. It is ok – to take time to mourn, to cry, to ask “why?” Lay this sadness, this hurt at our Lord’s feet.

*“My soul is calmer, yet still yearns for an answer.”* The answer is never simple. We live in a fallen world. Each unique soul has one thing in common – we are created in the image and likeness of our Creator – in the image and likeness of God. What does that image look like? This we can answer simply. That image is love. When humanity fell the perfect image of God within us became spoiled, twisted, not quite right. This brokenness is what each and every one of us battles against – we strive to once again make what was given to us fully good.

We are given the continual choice to be like the image of God within us – to BE love or to allow the cancer of sin to influence our decisions and actions. The very first action after the fall is that of a violent, senseless murder, of Cain slaying his brother Abel. Individuals who choose to go down such dark paths that lead to violence, destruction and hatred have allowed the image of God within them to become so covered in the dirt of sin that they no longer feel, see, nor understand His love – this is as great a tragedy as the actions they may commit.

*Lord – why don't you avenge the innocents, those affected by the violence of others?* St. Isaac of Syria explains, “The man who chooses to consider God an avenger, presuming that in this manner he bears witness to His justice, accuses Him of being bereft of goodness. Far be it, that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and

Ocean brimming with goodness! The aim of His design is the correction of men; and if it were not that, we should be stripped of the honor of our free will, perhaps He would not even heal us by reproof.”

We are in the midst of our journey to the greatest tragedy of all time. Imagine the suffering that our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ endured for our sake. However, God in His mercy has shown us that through Him there is Light, for we know this “tragedy” of Christ’s crucifixion is not the end of the story. Evil, hatred, and mistrust, do not win! Our Lord conquers death! He is Risen! He provides each of us with the means to conquer death – to make straight the twistedness of the fall.

This is the answer to our ‘why?’. Our sufferings, our hurt, our submission, our LOVE in times of adversity are what brings us closer to SALVATION. We are told in Matthew 7, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” The narrow gate is to love when love is absent. The narrow gate is to forgive when hatred abounds. The narrow gate is to have faith when the faithless attack.

In coming months we will continue to discover the answers to the “whys” – the facts about the attacks in Boston and Houston. Sadly many more acts of hatred will come before we meet our Lord at His second coming. With this in mind we keep in our hearts the untarnished image of Christ, of love, of forgiveness and of hope for they day there is “no more sickness, sorrow, or sighing.”

## Ten Steps to Local OCF Crisis Response

By V. Rev. Steven Voytovich, D.Min.

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We live in uncertain times with a growing propensity of exposure to a variety of violent events nationally and internationally. Between media and our ever-evolving cell phone, tablet and other technological advances, such overwhelming and traumatic events are quickly etched into our individual and collective hearts and souls. As such, we need to assist our young people, separated from their loved ones, to recognize signs and symptoms indicating strong emotional responses, and through the OCF community to provide support in the midst of the uncertainty surrounding traumatic events.

**First** step is not to wait until such an event to begin planning. *Pre-planning* is essential. As OCF Spiritual Advisors/Chaplains/Leaders/Volunteers, take time to learn about various layers of support available on your campus: perhaps there are local parish pastors who have some background in crisis response or are at least willing to be available to provide space and support should the need arise; inquire about professional means of support available on campus, and familiarize yourself with existing campus crisis response materials, including having your identification on file with the school in case of emergency; finally, develop, share, and test your OCF crisis response plan at a regularly scheduled OCF meeting early in the school year.

An OCF response might include: (plus others that might be developed locally)

- A text message going out to the group briefly stating the event occurring, any directions that may have been sent out by the school, and plans for the OCF to meet together, including where and when.
- Instructions for how students should check in: this could be a buddy system, new OCF members contacting more senior class members or local leaders.

**Second** step is to carefully plan an OCF gathering to address the crisis. If and when resources are in place, if you are in the midst of an event taking place at your school, consider having someone in OCF leadership with training in this area be part of this session:

- Briefly check-in with each student in having them share their experience of what occurred, while listening for particular connections or reactions to event/location or other dynamics for follow-up and possible referral. If a student begins to share about another trauma in their life they now recall, encourage staying with the present for now, that this is a normal occurrence, and definitely refer for follow-up to a professional.
- Share any updates from the school including plans to gather, pray, ...
- The Most important things to share are two related elements:
  - It is okay to feel badly in the midst of what happened.
  - It is normal to feel out of sorts; you are not going crazy
- Encourage each student to contact a loved one to check in with as well, if they haven't already.

- Also share if any follow-up is planned with OCF: visit to area parish, or other steps
- Try to encourage limiting exposure to media replaying events
- Encourage healthy self-care like getting appropriate rest, eating well, and exercising and relaxing regularly
- Pray together as a group

**Third** step: during the following days and weeks, continue to periodically check in with students (perhaps plan follow-up gathering), particularly those you might not have heard from. Refer those who have heightened reactions for additional follow-up support that you have previously identified.

**Fourth** step: as you hear of response-related steps being taken by greater local church, IOCC, etc., communicate regularly with students and even assist in arranging transportation or providing for other needs.

**Fifth** step: make yourself available to students who need someone to talk to in the days and weeks following a violent event. Focus on non-judgmental listening (it's ok to have your faith shaken) and on being present with the person instead of attempting to answer all their questions.

**Sixth** step: Be sure that **you** also are checking in regularly with colleagues and those you report to in order to share what is happening and to reflect on your own reactions and responses as you are supporting your OCF students.

**Seventh** step: later, some time after the event itself, when you observe most students have returned closer to normal, have a discussion utilizing some of these points:

- reflect on where they might have seen God's hand in all that transpired
- talk about our own responsibility to reflect God's love and support to others they may be interacting with
- and exploring how they may be putting lessons they have learned from this event
- into their daily lives going forward

*Note:* by modeling such support, prayer, guidance, and reflection through the course of such a traumatic event, students will have learned a valuable life lesson that they may draw upon later in life should they, God forbid, find themselves coming to terms with other violent acts and events.

**Eighth** step: If the event response includes some kind of school-wide memorial or remembrance, encourage and model participation of OCF youth, even if not in Orthodox context. Perhaps an opportunity will be possible to also arrange for similar prayer in local parish.

**Ninth** step: encourage students at the next holiday or school break schedule to check-in with their local parish priest and their family as an opportunity for further support following a traumatic event. Encourage them to ask for prayers in their local parish if

applicable. This will, without naming it, instill a sense of bringing our cares to the Church for prayer.

**Tenth** step: Apply our Orthodox ethos to prayerfully remember the event: perhaps forty days later, definitely a year later both to offer an opportunity to remember for those who were a part of it and as opportunity now for new students to appreciate this event as part of the life and history of this OCF. Pray for those directly impacted as well as those who suffer in the aftermath.

## **Thoughts in Response to the Events in Boston**

Popadia Junia Tolbert

"Oh dear God!" were the first words in my heart when I heard of the bombings in Boston. The horror of more mangled people, the fear that some of them may have been my friends, the heaviness in spirit caused by rampant evil thinly veiled as one more atrocity of man against man.

I know from experience that evil will break through and wreak havoc when man's heart allows it room to fester and grow. But still I ask: How is it possible that people will do this to their fellow human beings? Can the anger, even rage, I feel that these innocents are killed and maimed be called good? Or does it make me of the same spirit with the perpetrators? And how, after viewing one heartbreaking photo after another, from so many different tragic events all over the world, can my poor heart not become more stony and detached from the reality and suffering?

How can we be angry and not be guilty? How can we see others suffering and not feel guilty that we could not stop it, or comfort it, or control it? How can we bear more? Why do these things happen? The suicides of students and soldiers alike, the murders and abuse of children, robbery of innocence on every front - all assault us with the same goal: to make us hopeless and helpless and afraid. The goal of evil is to convince us that God is not powerful, and that there is nothing to have faith in. Despair.

But when we respond to the evil with faith, we can also be made strong, and quick to help, and compassionate. It can pull from the paralyzing grip of fear the love and the courage to face evil in the world and in ourselves and to do good, to help others and to be active in caring for and helping those in need. We realize that there is no force of domination we can manage that will eliminate evil. The power of evil is lost when we do not embrace it, but love and give instead. The heroic and self-sacrificing rush to help even as the smoke still billows is a witness that the power of good is greater than even the sense of self preservation in the human heart. It is powerful. It is Christ-like.

It is summed up in Christ's words from the cross, from His simple statement, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." How many times have I not seen that I was "them", that my judgments, selfishness and coldness as surely pin Him on the cross as any fear and political wrangling in Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago. That my sins stab through His temple, spill His blood, and wound Him and others every day. It is not just His words. It is the fact that He loved while He suffered, loved us as He said these words. Loves us even now: The love that accepts the fact that I and many do the wrong thing, thinking it is good; the love that is given even though I so often see only what is before me, not what is behind it, or what it will unleash. This Love is so personal that I know there is no point in trying to hide anything, but that the love itself goes into my inner closets and accepts me, frees me and heals me.

All the questions that arise in the events around us are not unanswered. They are out-pictured in His life and suffering, His knowing that evil would abound and seem

victorious, and His sacrifice that makes evil, though it seems powerful in this world, a lie. Comfort for all of the pain and horror is to be found in His love. And then we must act - do all that we can do, pouring out love and compassion to people in every setting as we fight against the darkness we find in ourselves. It is the tension of the two - the light and the dark, the evil and the good, the battle and the peace, the struggle and the striving, that awakens us to become participants in the battle that began when Satan rebelled even in Heaven, the battle to strive for the Goal, the Truth, the Beauty that is God's.