

Overcoming fear

From the Editors in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

There are no atheists in bio-hazard suits. Perhaps that sentiment has never been strictly true, even when we were still talking about foxholes. But fear does have a way of turning the mind to matters of ultimacy. In the present crisis, with Americans rattled by terror, the church has a responsibility to bear witness to the fact that trust in God and in the world God created is powerful enough to overcome even the most well-founded fear.

Apart from a fundamental trust in others, and in a moral ordering of the world, social life is impossible. We walk down the street because we trust that the persons we pass by will not turn to attack us. We take the train home from work because we trust that others have provided for the safe travel of all who stand waiting on the platform. We buy food from the grocery store because we trust that it will nourish us and not kill us. It is this trust—so basic that we scarcely think about it—that terrorists hope to undo, and that is why their actions are so profoundly irreligious whatever faith they may espouse.

Admittedly terrorists have powerful weapons on their side. One is simply their willingness to die even as they kill. How do I trust that another will care about my life if he has no care for his own? (It's not incidental that all major religions are very reluctant to cancel the human interest in self-preservation in favor of a higher principle.)

The terror that recently arrived in anthrax-laced letters marks an appallingly novel moment in human history. When the bubonic plague swept Europe in the 14th century, infectious disease was an incomprehensible mystery. Now the employment of bio-weapons is a witting choice. Fear of a bomb is debilitating enough. Fear of a malign contagion that attacks from within is the stuff of panic. We begin to wonder if we can trust the air we breathe.

It's understandable that under such circumstances people will isolate themselves. Americans aren't even bowling alone, let alone flying together: too many people around. But when trust erodes, so does society. A flight to privacy is not the answer

to a collective problem.

The church can best minister in this new atmosphere of fear not only by proclaiming its message, but by demonstrating a divinely inspired conviviality that no fear can suppress. Worship and pray together, yes, as often as possible. But join also as the people of God with as many neighbors as possible—to share a meal, play some music, whack a volleyball or discuss a movie. Show that the church is a place where perfect love overcomes all fear, and where trust defines a way of life.