

September 4, 1983

About a year ago I visited a very interesting museum in California. It was an outdoor museum about earthquakes. One of the exhibits consisted of a farm fence which ran perpendicular to and across the San Andreas fault line. In the last great earthquake the fence was disrupted, so that the part of it approaching the faultline from the east "missed" the part continuing on to the west by about fifteen feet—the distance the two sections of earth had shifted with respect to each other. It was a dramatic sight indeed.

The exhibit went on to explain that some day, inevitably, the process which the discontinuous fence so dramatically exhibited would cause part of Los Angeles to be in Alaska. The exhibit concluded with a display of photographs of the dramatic architecture so loved by Californians—houses built on stilts atop cliffs affording dramatic views of the sea; an aerial bridge forty stories up in space connecting two towers of a Hilton Hotel, and so forth. And the exhibit concluded with a kind of question, as it juxtaposed the known inevitability of the earth's movement with the photographs of the risk-prone buildings.

There is a flaw, or fault, in the earth's spiritual landscape. This fault runs all the way around the globe: Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, the Philippines, North and South Korea, Afganistan, Poland, and many, many other places. This giant fussure in the world's spiritual landscape is inevitably tragedy-prone. And so, when an idealistic leader is ruthlessly gunned down in a Manilla airport, or when innocent passengers of a civilian airliner are murdered, given the cliff-hanging, hair trigger world we have structured for ourselves, can we claim there is any surprise in this?

Religious people understand that the fault in the world's spiritual landscape is not a matter of politics, or of wealth; it is not something which will be solved by one more revolution or dramatic rearrangement of systems, of externals. To believe this is just another way of trying to live by bread alone. Rather, we understand it to be a problem of the inner life, of humankind's aggregate inner condition. Moreover, it is not a problem of the mind only, although it certainly involves the intellect, but it is also a problem of the heart, of human beings' deeper motives for which our minds are but servants. This is why texts which uplift us spiritually, such as scripture, are frequently expressed as poetry. Poetry opens the heart. Shrill political vituperation closes it.

The compassion we need to understand the truth about the sorts of tragedies that have occurred this week comes only with practice. Those who have not practiced compassion will not see what needs to be seen with the eyes of compassion.